THE LIFE STORY OF A FOX

J·C·TREGARTHEN

To dear Jean

from

Pete. Dick & Ann.

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THE LIFE STORY OF A FOX

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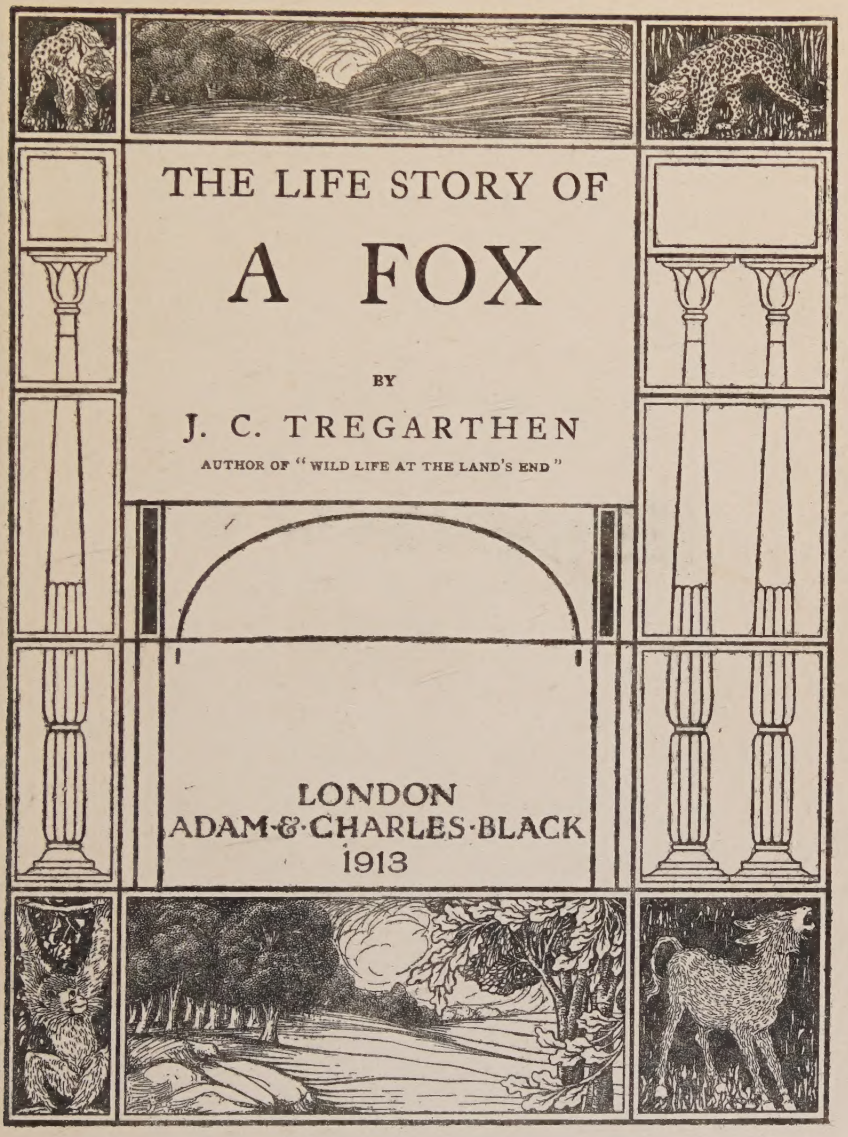
"ACROSS THE CHASM."



THE LIFE STORY OF

A FOX

BY

J. C. TREGARTHEN

AUTHOR OF "WILD LIFE AT THE LAND'S END"

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TO THE MEMORY OF

THE LATE

LORD WILLOUGHBY DE BROKE,

MASTER OF THE WARWICKSHIRE HOUNDS,

1876 TO 1900.

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THE FOX

CHAPTER I

EARLY MEMORIES

THE earth where I was born was far down the face of a steep cliff and opened on a sloping shelf of turf, from the edge of which the undercliff fell sheer to the sea. The entrance we used most was slightly above the level of the springy sward and led by a small tunnel to a roomy chamber where daylight never penetrated.

There on the bare dry ground the vixen laid us—my two sisters and me—and there we were suckled. If I was like the baby cubs I have since seen, I was born blind, my muzzle was blunt and rounded, and my coat as black as a crow, the only white about me being a few hairs in the tag of my tiny brush. Even at the time when I first remember

what I was like my fur was still a very dark colour and bore no resemblance to the russet hue of a full-grown fox.

This was a few weeks after my eyes were opened, when, after awaking from our first sleep, we were in the habit of sunning ourselves just inside the mouth of the earth. It was there, with my muzzle resting on the vixen's flank, that I got my earliest glimpse of the world. The turf was then almost hidden by pink flowers, over the heads of which I could see, between two of the pinnacles that bordered the ledge, the sea breaking on a reef where the cormorants used to gather at low water and stand with folded or outstretched wings until the rising tide drove them to the big white rock beyond.

So few things moved within our field of vision that every creature we saw afforded us the keenest interest. Sometimes during days together nothing stirred but the stems of the thrift and the surf about the reef, for the sky was cloudless when the hot weather set in. Now and again a red-legged crow came and perched on one of the pinnacles, crying 'Daw, daw!' until its mate joined it, and then, all too soon, they took wing and flew away;

at times a hawk or a peregrine would glide by and break the monotony of our life.

Our narrow green was dotted by five boulders, and one of these we could see from the earth. On this our most frequent visitor alighted. It was an old raven, who presently dropped to the ground, walked up to the remains of any fowl or rabbit lying near the heap of sandy soil which my mother had scratched out when making the earth, and pecked, pecked, pecked, until only the bones were left. Then, uttering his curious 'Cawpse, cawpse!' he would hop along the ground, flap his big black wings, and pass out of sight. I feel sure that he saw us watching him, for his eyes often turned our way.

One afternoon, to our astonishment, a half-grown rabbit came lopping along, and stopped to nibble the turf at a spot barely a good spring from the vixen. She, usually very drowsy, half opened her eyes and turned her face towards the intruder, but she did not rise to her feet. We youngsters were beside ourselves with excitement, but were not allowed to scramble over her side to drive away this audacious trespasser on our private domain. This, I think, was owing to my mother's great anxiety on our account.

I have never known a vixen so determined that her cubs should lie hidden by day; but then we were her first litter. She would constantly warn us against venturing out whilst the sun was up. So particular was she that we were not permitted to expose as much as our muzzles outside the earth, though birds and rabbits moved about there freely. We could not understand the restriction, and I fear that we thought it unkind of her to confine us to a cramped, stuffy hole the summer day through, when we longed to be gambolling about the sward or basking in those warm corners under the boulders which retained some of their heat even after the sun went down.

It is true that I tried hard to get my liberty. Time after time, when I thought she had dozed off, I endeavoured to squeeze between her and the low roof. It was of no use, though I used the utmost stealth and trod as lightly as a feather. Never once did I catch her napping. On the few occasions when I was on the point of succeeding she seized me between her velvety lips and put me back in my place between my two little sisters.

Thus, by the kindest of mothers, I was disciplined in the ways of the wild creatures, learning, by

constant correction and example, that the world outside the earth is denied to us by day, and is ours to move and play and seek our prey in only by night.

And how short those nights were! What a weary, weary time it was, awaiting their approach! How impatiently we watched their slow advent! how we tingled with delight in every limb on seeing the shadow of the high boulder creep and creep across the turf until it reached the pinnacle that had a patch of golden lichen on it! Then, as the sun sank behind the headland, the nearer sea became sombre, the bright expanse beyond darkened, and at last the stars would begin to show in the sky. By this my mother had shaken off her drowsiness, the glow had come back into her green eyes, and, rising to her feet, she would leave the earth. If she detected no danger, she would call us to her. What a moment that was! the pent-up energy of hours of restraint breaking out in such rompings and runnings after our own brushes as I have never seen in any other young creatures. Wearying at last of these antics and of jumping over the back of the vixen, who watched us with loving eyes, we settled down to the game of lurk and pounce

amongst the boulders. To our great delight, the vixen often joined in this before setting out in search of food. Her nimbleness and skill in dodging filled us with amazement. Like a flash she was on us; there was no avoiding her rushes, though she always avoided ours, and her movements were as silent as the passing of a shadow when a swift cloud crosses the sun.

I shall never forget those frolics in which she shared: they not only were useful training for the life before us, as I afterwards realized, but also induced in us a fondness for her so great that we could not bear to have her out of our sight when she left us to seek the food we needed. We would watch her as she followed the narrow track that wound up the cliff, till from the rocks near the top she looked down to assure herself of our safety before going inland. And that was not the last we saw of her. Times and times I have caught sight of her bright eyes glittering like twin stars on the summit of the ivy-covered scarp where the magpies built.

A more affectionate mother cubs never had; but for the life of me I could not understand why she was so anxious about our safety: I had neither seen nor heard anything in our little world to alarm

me. Whether she had or not I do not know, but she was haunted by the dread of something, as I could tell by the way she used to look about her and listen when watching our gambols, and by her starting at the slightest unusual sound. Her nervousness made me nervous, and, thus infected by my mother's fears, I got to be afraid without in the least knowing what there was to be afraid of.

These vague fears were on two occasions the cause of false alarms. Once, somewhere along the cliff, a dry stick snapped. That was enough. My sisters and I fled in terror to our den, where we were joined a minute later by the anxious vixen, who had just left us for a foraging expedition. There was no danger: it was merely a lumbering badger which crossed our playground later on; but I have learnt since that no wild thing can hear the snap of a twig without alarm. The badger was a strange-looking creature: his face was white, with black stripes from ear to muzzle; his gray hair all but swept the ground; and he walked not lightly on his toes as we do but heavily on the soles of his feet.

At another time the whistling of harvest curlews frightened us almost out of our lives. These were

both needless terrors; but soon I was brought face to face with evidence of a real enemy, the one, no doubt, of whom my mother lived in such dread. It was not many days after the coming of the whimbrels—for the moon, a mere sickle then, had not waxed to half its full size—when two incidents occurred which proved to me, a raw, heedless cub, that there was serious ground for fear. Both happened in broad daylight, one close on the heels of the other.

One drowsy noon we were watching from our usual place the old raven pecking at the hind-quarters of a rabbit, when with an awful thud a big stone struck the turf close to him, bounded off, and rolled towards the corner of our playground. In a twinkling, before it had stopped rolling, we had retreated to the very end of the earth and there lay trembling, and wondering, even in our consternation, whether the mischievous magpies, who had set up a sudden clamour, were not the cause of our discomfiture. When we stole out in the quiet of dusk, my mother walked straight to the stone and smelt it, and I, being curious, must needs follow her example. What an awesome smell it had! The scent was unlike anything I

had sniffed before, and surely not the scent of any beast of the field! The vixen, who stood there watching me, noted the cold shiver it sent through my young limbs and seemed by her expressive face to say: 'The creature that tainted that stone is the cause of all my fears,' and, further, if I read aright the sad look that rose to her eyes: 'He will prove your scourge as he has proved mine.' My story will tell whether it has been so.

In our games that night I avoided the corner where the stone lay, and so did my sisters. I noticed, too, that the vixen was away in quest of food a shorter time than usual, and did not go out a second time as she had generally done since our appetites had grown. We had, therefore, to satisfy our hunger on the gosling she had brought. This we broke up ourselves with our sharp milk teeth, chattering and quarrelling as was our wont whilst the meagre feast lasted. The vixen contented herself with a few old bones.

The other incident was graver, causing injury to my mother. It happened thus. She had gone out one night shortly after—for the moon was still not quite full—but, though absent till nearly dawn, she failed to procure any food. I remember

our impatience at her long absence and our disappointment on seeing her issue from the furze without even a few mice in her mouth. However, there was no help for it. The sun was reddening the sky near the horizon, so, supperless and sullen, we curled ourselves up and fell asleep. On awaking, as we did before our usual time, we began to cry pitifully for food, and at length, driven to desperation by our complaints, the vixen stole out at noon, not under cover of mist or fog but with the sun shining in the bluest of skies. Ravenous with hunger, we crowded the mouth of the earth, listening for the sound of her returning steps. Long, long we harkened without catching any whisper of her approach. At last we heard a muffled, double report, and after an interval the faint patter of her pads. In my anxiety to see what she had brought I put my head out and kept my eyes fixed on the run in the yellow furze through which she always came. Never shall I forget my horror at what I saw. Instead of her russet face with its black and white markings, her mask below the eyes was all blood and dreadful to behold. I am ashamed to say it, but her appearance terrified me, though I loved her as I loved my

life. She staggered into the earth, and took no more notice of us than if we had been strange cubs, which alarmed me more than her dazed look. The reason of her plight was a puzzle to me, and though the stone, with its horrid association, forced itself upon my notice as a possible cause, I dismissed the idea that it could have done the injury, inasmuch as it was lying where it had rolled. No; in a vague way I attributed her state to the daylight, so great had my fear of it become. Ah me, how innocent I was in those far-away days!

We were free now to go and come as we listed, but, famished though we were, not one of us attempted to leave the earth except to get a drink of water, and we lay huddled together, looking out of the corners of our eyes at our poor mother, as miserable and forlorn a litter of foxes as could anywhere be found. In the depth of the night, however, the pangs of hunger compelling us, we left the vixen, who seemed to be asleep, and crept out. Being bigger than my sisters, I felt called upon to take the lead, and neither of them showed any inclination to dispute it with me. But where to take them, or how to get a supper, I had not an idea.

I am not going to cast one word of blame on my mother for delaying to teach us to shift for ourselves. It was out of affection that she kept us so long to the nursery ; and how could she possibly have foreseen the calamity that had so unexpectedly disabled her and thrown us on our own resources ? And, lest a suspicion of neglect towards us should attach to her memory, I must here say what I have not yet mentioned—that by the death of the dog-fox, my father, the burden of our up-bringing from the day of our birth fell wholly on my little mother. What labour and sacrifice this must have meant ! After we were weaned, how often have I seen her go without her share of the prey that we greedy cubs might suffer no stint ! When has cliff or moor witnessed greater devotion, greater unselfishness ? And now she lay in the earth so sorely wounded as to be indifferent to our helpless plight. I will not dwell on my feelings, but they made it difficult to focus my thoughts on the undertaking before me.

For a minute or two I sat on my haunches near the big boulder, considering gravely where I should go, my sisters the while cruising restlessly up and down the turf with all the impatience of irresponsi-

bility, awaiting developments. This to-and-fro movement of theirs added to my bewilderment, and even the bats flitting about were a trifle disconcerting to a cub with three routes to choose from, each in its turn more inviting than the others.

There was the path leading to the upper cliff; there was, I assumed, a way down the undercliff; and there was, I knew, a track between the two which the badger had worn. I had never been up the cliff, and after the vixen's recent experience dared not go, though it was night, and nothing stirred but the reeds about our drinking-place and the leaves of the gnarled tree where the magpies built.

In the end I decided, if I could find a way, to go down the cliff. There was a sandy cove below that I had often longed to reach in my mother's absence, but my strength was unequal to the descent. I determined to try to go there now. So, leading the others past the little basin where we quenched our thirst, I brought them along the cliff to a place where the sheer precipice changed into a succession of ledges, down which we leaped until brought to a standstill above a wall

of nearly perpendicular rock. It was impossible to reach the flat shelf below by leaping: we should have broken our bones; and there we stood staring over the brink at the smooth rock beneath us, and wondering how we could pass it.

Again my sisters looked to me to take the lead, so, putting forth all the power of my untried claws, I began, brush first, to crawl down a fissure that lay aslant the precipitous face of the great slab. This I followed, partly by feeling with my hind claws where foothold permitted a firm grip, partly by turning my face and seeing where the easiest line of descent lay. At last I succeeded in reaching the bottom without mishap. My sisters imitated me, coming down more easily than I had done, probably on account of their greater skill and lesser weight.

A creek, too wide to jump, now separated us from the sand, but, taking to the water, we waded until we lost bottom, and then, for the first time in our lives, by swimming crossed deep water. More bedraggled creatures than we looked on landing it would be difficult to imagine; but we shook ourselves from muzzle to tag, making the spray fly from our wet coats, and set about searching

for something to eat. Where the beach met the cliff was a cave that ran a long way in and had two lesser caves opening out of it. We explored these without finding in either of them anything except dry seaweed and pieces of cork, so we retraced our steps and made for the other side of the cove. There, just beyond the ribs of a wreck that projected from the sand, we came on a big jellyfish. Though we should have turned up our nose at such food in ordinary times, it was a windfall in our famished condition, and we swallowed the quivering mass with gusto, sand and all. Good food or bad, it filled our stomachs and stopped the gnawing pangs of hunger.

We then clambered to the top of some rocks that stood out above the sand, and found there a small pool of water, temptingly clear. Being thirsty after our meal, we began to lap it. Ugh! it was nasty to the taste, but, what was worse, the mistake was a blow to my conceit, for I was humiliated by the reproachful glances my sisters shot at me. To avoid them I raised my eyes, and, as I did so, caught sight of the vixen on the cliff at the spot where we had taken to the ledges. Then it came home to me that I had done wrong to leave the

earth without her, and, fearing she would be angry, I hid myself amongst the rocks, as did my sisters. The vixen, usually quick as lightning in her movements, came but very slowly down the cliff on the line we had taken, and as slowly crossed the sand to the cave. This she entered, and for a time was lost to view. My inclination nearly led me to quit my hiding-place and go after her; but again fear checked me, and I remained where I was. On leaving the cave, she with difficulty followed our trail to the spot where we had eaten the jelly-fish, and, not seeing us, seemed to lose heart, for she sank to the ground and called us with a most piteous cry, which at once drew us to her side. I can see even now the delight on her poor face as we bounded towards her across the sand that separated us. After licking us with her swollen tongue, she led us up the cliff by a much easier path than the one we had followed in descending, and we soon reached the level of our earth. We proceeded towards it in single file by the narrowest of paths, passing our usual drinking-place, where, for a reason I am going to explain, the supply was so scanty that we found barely enough water to quench our thirst. The vixen was curled up at

"A MORE AFFECTIONATE MOTHER CUBS NEVER HAD." *Page 6.*

the mouth of the den when we reached it, and we had to climb over her back to get to our sleeping-places.

A short period free from troubles followed, during which my mother rapidly recovered. Nevertheless, the wounds on her face were barely healed when there befell one of the greatest calamities of my eventful life—a calamity that was near putting an end to us all.

Before attempting to describe it, I must mention the sufferings we endured in the days following our adventure down the cliff, through the gradual drying up of the water that supplied our drinking-place. Night after night, when we repaired to the basin that the falling water had hollowed in the rock, I had noticed that the stream, which came from some hidden source beneath a pile of boulders, got smaller and smaller, and, after the very hot weather set in, dwindled to a mere trickle. To such a thin thread did it shrink that from the mouth of the earth, which was not many yards away, we could no longer hear it plashing into the basin. Now and then, especially when some animal, generally the badger, had been there before us, we were driven to such an extremity as

to be compelled to lick the dew off the turf to cool our tongues until the water had collected again.

It was a terrible time. To this day we speak of the year of my birth as the Dry Year, and indeed I, who was a May fox, was nearly three moons old before I saw rain, which fell on the afternoon of the day when the curlews' whistling scared us. I remember, though not as vividly as the rainbow seen that day, the embrowned turf of our playground being dotted with slugs which the downpour had enticed out of the sunless crevices of the rocks.

The rain had ceased before nightfall, and the following day the sky, which had been black and lowering, became as cloudless as before, whilst the heat, previously intense, became well-nigh unbearable. Hour after hour we lay in the deep shade of the bracken fronds at the entrance, panting for breath and longing for the water we were not allowed to get before dusk. At the first sign of twilight, and even whilst the after-glow suffused the sky, we rushed to the drinking-place, our three masks completely filling the basin, which we soon lapped dry. Almost as refreshing as the water we swallowed was the cool spray—despite the rain it

was no more—that fell on our heads from the lip of the rock above.

For several days from dawn to dusk we thus endured the agony of parching thirst, till at last, when our tongues lolled out, and one of my sisters showed signs of utter exhaustion, the vixen so far yielded to our entreaties as to permit us to slink out, one by one, to drink.

Unfortunately we could not reach the reeds about the water without exposing ourselves to the eyes of the magpies overhead. On spying us they set up such a clamour that every bird and beast for a great distance along the cliffs must have known that a fox was moving, and rejoiced at our misfortune.

We have many enemies, but none whom we despise so much as magpies, crows, and jays. Their treatment of us is as unprovoked as it is insulting. We have never injured them, and yet, as I shall tell later, the pariahs of the wild, that gorge on our unburied kills, seek every opportunity of betraying us.

Those cliff magpies, at whose tongues we suffered such indignities, must have spent their days in watching our movements. After my sisters

had had their drink, it took hours for the basin to refill, yet as soon as my muzzle projected beyond the bracken when I went to take my turn, the hateful wretches would cry out, 'There he comes! there he comes!'

I never grew indifferent to this daily annoyance, and in a rage I used to lap up what water there was in choking haste, so as to escape the mobbing of these black and white pests who flew just beyond my reach, and at times even brushed with their wings the tops of the tall reeds about the basin.

We were not the only sufferers from the drought. Indeed everything suffered, and most of all perhaps the herbage. The thrift and white campion that covered the ledges, the ferns that found roothold in the crannies and crevices of the rocks, and the stone-crop and lichens growing on the rocks themselves, drooped and withered; and at last the boggy ground above the drinking-place caked and dried, so that the reeds turned yellow, and rattled rather than swished when the night wind stirred them. Under the scorching sun the thread of water shrank and shrank until it dripped drop by drop, and finally dried up altogether. At my last visit

to the drinking-place the smooth basin was hot with the fierce rays, and the moss about the edge of the rock above was nearly as moistureless as the crinkled lichen on the pinnacles.

In these conditions it was impossible to remain where we were, and that night my mother reluctantly decided to abandon our home and to lead us up the cliff. Would that she had taken us the moment the stars showed, instead of waiting until deep night; for the delay nearly proved fatal to us all. A fox's life is so short that he cannot forget even the groundless scares his fears make him the victim of, so it is not to be wondered at that the events of the night I am about to describe are almost as vivid to me still as at the time they happened.

My sisters had returned once more from the dried-up basin to which they had been some five or six times since sunset, and joined me where I lay near the mouth of the earth, waiting for the dew to fall and listening for the footsteps of the vixen who had gone to get ready the new lair. It was a beautiful night—the sea calm, and the surf about the reef alight with phosphorescence, whilst the furze-bushes and the clump of brambles near the

reeds were dotted with glow-worms. There was even a solitary one on the drooping bracken above the entrance. A wind of summer strength stirred the withered herbage and murmured around the precipitous crags above our heads, but, save the boom from the great cave below when the tide rose, all was still. Suddenly, without warning of any kind, there came a flash of light from the cliffs above the sandy cove where we had eaten the jelly-fish. It died away and then returned, more brightly than before. It was not nearly so fierce as the lines of fire I had seen zigzagging the black sky on the afternoon of the heavy rain, nor was there any thunder with it as then, but there was a strange, crackling noise, as of animals crunching bones.

Immediately flames leapt in great tongues from the brambly thicket beyond the reeds. These drove us to the den ; and there we crouched listening to the awful sound, which grew louder and louder. Soon a faint glare lit up a part of the earth as far in as the spot where two rocks narrowed the tunnel. Before this I was on the point of bolting ; but now fear seized my limbs and I could not rise, could only crouch closer and closer to the earth like my sisters. Whilst we lay there huddled

together and crying out for the vixen she returned, darkening the tunnel as she came towards us. Scarcely had she joined us when an evil-smelling fog rolled in, causing us to keep our muzzles close to the ground. Then the fire swept past the earth, lighting it up to the end where we lay. Panic-stricken though I was, I remember noticing how the smooth floor gleamed, and how curiously the light glowed on the vixen's fur. Suddenly the heat became less intense, and a current of fresh air entering the earth, revived us as we lay panting at the point of suffocation.

The crackling and roar of the flames had long died away before we dared to quit our sanctuary, and when at last we ventured to the mouth of the earth, what a sight met our gaze! Our playground was charred, except for a narrow strip near its edge, and towards this a thin line of fire moved slowly, blotting out the criss-cross tracks we had worn between the boulders. A ring of sparks encircled the raven's perch, and crept higher and higher, consuming the lichen and leaving bare rock in its train; where the brambles had stood was a heap of glowing ash; grasses and reeds had disappeared; in short, the place which had been our little world

and of which we knew every blade and spray, was as nearly past recognition as a corn-field after harvest. Away towards the west great ruddy flames leapt from the furze brake and lit up sky and sea and headland with such a lurid light as I had never seen ; whilst on the near slopes a hundred smaller fires flickered and died, to blaze again and re-illuminate the great piles of bared rock. Sparks falling from above showed that the ivy round the home of the magpies had not escaped ; and as the birds had mobbed me most unmercifully that very day, I rejoiced in their misfortune.

The vixen, satisfied at last that she might venture forth, took up my puny sister, who was then unable to stand, and set out for the steep path by which she usually reached the top of the cliff. My other sister and I trod closely on her heels as she picked her way over the heated ground and skirted the glowing remains of the furze-bushes. In the ascent my pads were rather badly burnt and my fore-legs singed by a fire which suddenly broke out in some smouldering heather into which they sank. The glimpse I got of the face of the precipice showed that the ivy had lost all its leaves, the bared stems standing out plainly against the black fissures that

"THROUGH THE GLOWING FURZE."

seamed the great wall of rock besprinkled with sparks which in their fall resembled shooting stars.

When we reached the summit we could hear the magpies calling out, but, to do them justice, they were not mobbing us then. Once beyond the blackened ground we ranged up one on each side of the vixen, and after crossing fields of stubble and turnips and getting far beyond the reek of the burning, we caught the scent of the brook for which she was making. We struck it where it wound through marshy ground on the outskirts of a furze brake, and in a trice were up to our bellies in the delicious cool stream with our tongues hard at work. The water was cold and sweet; there was plenty of it, and we lapped and lapped as long as we could take in a drop. In all my life I never again enjoyed a drink like that, and the mud that stuck to my legs seemed to soothe the pain of the burns.

My little sister was able to follow us now without assistance, but the vixen, who was exhausted with carrying her so far, went at a walking pace between the stems of the furze and kept looking back to see that she was keeping up with us, though she took no notice whatever of my other

sister who was going on three legs, or of myself whose poor feet were so tender that I hardly dared touch the ground.

Emerging from the furze we came upon a circle of turf, where we caught sight of at least a dozen rabbits scurrying to the holes that honey-combed the ground at the foot of a high cairn. One of these had been enlarged, as the heap of fresh earth showed, and into it the vixen led us to a dry and sweet-smelling den, where she left us, to procure food. In there it seemed as still as death to us who had had the roar of the sea in our ears all our lives, but the lair was very comfortable, and roomy enough for us to stand side by side whilst the vixen distributed the rabbit she presently brought us. We found, too, on curling ourselves up, that, big as we were, we could lie close together without trespassing on the tunnel as we had latterly done in the cliff earth. So, as we were thoroughly weary, we soon forgot the dangers we had passed and fell asleep, our mother lying between us and the opening, as was her invariable custom.

CHAPTER II

EDUCATION

I was startled out of my sleep by a stamping overhead, caused by the rabbits in the heart of whose burrow we were lying. The noise, which broke out again and again just as I was on the point of dropping off, irritated me so much that at last I got on my hind-legs, thrust my muzzle into the hole in the roof, and breathed loudly through my nostrils. This snorting was not without result, for after the stampede that followed there was quiet for a long time. Nevertheless the tiresome creatures had spoilt my day's rest and, try as I might, I could not doze off again. My sisters slept through it all, and the vixen showed no sign of being disturbed, except that she half opened her eyes when the rabbits scampered over the spot where she lay. It was very early, as I could tell by the scent of the

furze that stole along the tunnel and almost overpowered the flavour of rabbit, from which the den was never quite free. To pass the weary hours I licked the mud off my legs, which still smarted, and, whilst I did so, thought of our narrow escape, and wondered in a vague way whether fires were to be numbered amongst the regular troubles of a fox's life.

At length the vixen roused herself, and when the coolness and smell of the air warned her that the sun had set, she rose and led us forth, not for our usual gambols, but, as it proved, for our first lesson in hunting. I suspected something unusual was afoot the moment she ordered us to follow her across the stream, whither she had taken us to drink; and the further we got from the earth, the more excited I grew at the prospect of the adventures before us. It was most exhilarating to be wandering over the broad, high country, which, in comparison with our ledge at the foot of the precipice, seemed like the roof of the world. For nights and nights past I had yearned to accompany my mother on her rounds, and the unexpected gratification of my intense longing thrilled every fibre of my being. So great was my excitement that I

quite forgot not only a loose milk tooth that had been worrying me, but even the tenderness of my poor pads, on which I had with difficulty limped to the drinking-place.

The vixen ran steadily some dozen paces in front, and side by side we cubs followed in her train, noiselessly as shadows. It fascinated me to watch her lissom movements as she stole along, and to note the ripples that ruffled her smooth coat when she crossed the broken ground. We had passed over one hill and were breasting the next beyond before I began to wonder what we were going to see and how soon, and then, without warning, she reared on her hind-legs, listened with ears erect, and pounced on something in a patch of rushes, in which she buried her long muzzle. The next instant she came trotting back to my little sister, and gave her the mouse she held between her lips. Her quick hearing had detected its movements in the undergrowth.

But mousing was apparently not the chief business of the night, for, without dwelling, she stepped across the dried-up runnel which the rushes fringed, and headed for the craggy ridge above. In her progress up the steep slope she kept scanning the

ground to right and left of the trail as if she expected at any moment to see the prey she was in search of, and when near the crest, she crouched and crawled forward with the utmost caution. With breathless excitement we wormed our bodies along in her wake, as though we had been trained to it. But we had not; we were imitating her instinctively, and kept our distance as faithfully as the shadow of her brush that darkened the moonlit ground in front of us.

On reaching the ridge I could not help shifting my gaze to glance at the wide marshland below us, so strikingly unlike any scene my young eyes had looked on. Here and there on the level expanse sheets of water and a winding stream shone like silver, and from the great reed-beds about them came a soft voice like the murmur of waves on a distant beach. This was the impression of a stolen instant, and no sooner were my eyes back on the vixen than she sank to the ground as though she had suddenly lost the use of her legs. We did the same. This pleased her, as I could tell by the expression of satisfaction in the eager face which she turned slowly towards us and as slowly withdrew, brushing aside as she did so the

dry bents that rose a good way up her long ears.

At first I wondered what she had found, as the only living things visible to me were some rabbits far below on the lip of a funnel-shaped warren. But presently over her head I saw the tips of the ears of a rabbit quite close to us, and my heart began to thump as it had perhaps never done before. The sight of the living prey had awoke in me the dormant spirit of the hunter that has hardly slumbered since; and not in me only—my sisters were evidently as excited as I was, for their brushes were lashing mine as wildly as mine did theirs.

The rabbit meanwhile winded danger and, as its nostrils showed, kept sniffing the air to try and locate it. When it succeeded, its eyes fell, not on a stealthy enemy thirsting for its blood but—so sudden was the vixen's change of attitude and demeanour—on a harmless, playful fox rolling on her back as I had seen her roll in utter guilelessness a hundred times. The rabbit started, as well it might, and I expected to see it dive into its hole; but, marvellous to relate, instead of seeking safety it regained its composure and resumed its nibbling on

an almost bare patch, towards which the assumed frolics of the vixen and the slant of the ground were leading her. Then, with one of the lightning-like rushes which made her look a blurred mass even to our quick eyes, she was on it, and when she faced us the rabbit's head and hind-quarters hung limp as she held it across her mouth.

On witnessing the kill we cubs jumped to our feet, eager to partake of the first course of our supper. But when we attempted to take it from her mouth, to our amazement the vixen snarled at us as she had never done before. My little sister, to whom she had always been so tender, was the last to try, and, incredible as it may seem, the vixen turned on her like a fury.

Nothing but my desire to record faithfully the impressions of that time would make me own that I considered my mother unnatural and cruel in denying food to the weakling among her cubs. If the water which had cooled our parched throats the night before had scalded us we should not have been so taken aback as by this sudden change of conduct on her part. It was simply incomprehensible. Had something outside our knowledge

caused her to turn against us? If not, what did she mean by her harshness?

It did occur to me that this unaccountable behaviour might be feigned, and that presently she would drop the rabbit at our feet and be again the affectionate mother she had always been. Indeed, I watched her out of the corners of my eyes from the spot to which I had retired, expecting to see her snarl relax into a grin. But in this I was disappointed, for, on reaching a ledge below, to which we followed her at a respectful distance, she devoured every bit of the luscious morsel before our eyes, though she knew well enough that we were ravenously hungry. The delicious smell of the hot entrails which the wind brought us put the keenest edge on my appetite—already sharp set by the previous night's shortness—and with the strong craving to satisfy it came the novel thought of satisfying it with a rabbit of my own catching. The bunnies were still playing about on the edge of the warren, and whilst the vixen kept shifting her gaze from them to me, licking her blood-stained lips, the lesson she wished to teach suddenly flashed upon me, and the explanation of her conduct was complete. She was saying as

plainly as could be: 'There is your prey. I have shown you how to catch it. Go and get your own supper.' I required no further prompting. Then and there I began my first stalk under the eyes of all I loved in the world.

Summoning my untried powers, I wormed myself over the ground towards a single bush that screened me from the observation of most of the rabbits. Its shelter gained, I looked back and up to where three pairs of green eyes regarded my every movement, and then peeped with the utmost caution round the corner of the furze towards my prey. The bunnies were all there and thoroughly alert, and so disconcerting did I find their united gaze that I drew my head back to consider the situation. When I peeped again half their number showed their white scuts and went to ground, and the other half seemed prepared to follow their example.

Satisfied that direct approach was out of the question, I walked aslant the slope towards a piece of flat ground on a level with the warren, as though I were engaged on some engrossing pursuit in that direction. As I went I did not even squint at the rabbits, though it cost me an effort to look straight before my muzzle. My simulated detachment

from my prey must, I felt sure, have excited the admiration of my dear mother, and so must the thoroughness with which I gave myself over to the antics that took me at first farther and farther away and then nearer and nearer to the few remaining rabbits, whose curiosity had got the better of their fears. The silly creatures were quite taken in by the capers I cut, and one at least realized his danger too late, for ere he could reach his hole I snapped him up and bore him up the hill towards the vixen.

Insignificant as the incident appears to me now, it was one of the greatest events of my life. Every fox is proud of his first kill, and I was no little elated by mine. Indeed, I felt I must make some sort of demonstration in honour of the occasion. Imagine me, then, a handsome young dog-fox, head erect, ears pricked, brush on end and well fluffed out, trotting along on the very tips of my toes with my first rabbit between my jaws, and you have a picture of me as I swaggered over the bare turf in the moonlight, before the eyes of my admiring mother and jealous sisters. I shall never forget the pride I felt nor the inner voice that kept whispering, 'You are able to get your own living now, my boy, but don't be too cocky!'

I got on rapidly after this my first experience. How could I do otherwise, with such a clever and painstaking little mother as I had to instruct me in the wiles and ways of our craft? In a short time I became expert not only in catching young rabbits, rats, voles, and mice, but in picking up the feathered prey that frequented fen and hillside.

Of course I met with many disappointments; pheasants, partridges and wild-duck often escaped my clutches when I already considered them mine. My failures were due chiefly to inexperience, but in a measure also to the intrusion of other foragers, who turned up at critical moments and ended for me the work of hours. On one occasion a hunted hare passed between me and a covey of partridges I was drawing up to; but the birds, who squatted in a circle with their heads outwards, as their custom is, did not rise until a pack of stoats came along on his line, and with their noisy yelpings broke the silence of the roosting-place. On another, the sudden appearance of a poaching cat defrauded me of a pheasant on the edge of the pine-wood; but that night I killed before the darkness faded, and had buried what I could not eat before the vixen raised the 'dawn' cry.

After good hunting we used to romp home together over the furze-dotted land or across the fen, and from sheer high spirits vixen and cubs alike used to bound over the bushes or clumps of rushes and sags across our path. Week after week nothing happened to disturb our peace or excite our fears, but, for all our apparent security, we were never abroad at sunrise unless a thick fog lay over the fen.

In those expeditions I used latterly to separate myself from the vixen on reaching the hunting-ground and seek my prey alone, rejoining her when she sounded the call to leave the trail or ambuscade. In this way I became more and more independent, and at times would turn a deaf ear to her summons. Twice I was so belated that the pools by the way reflected the rosy fore-glow of the dreaded sun as I scurried past them.

I may have spent a month in the vixen's company before I could make up my mind to shake off her authority and forage where I pleased. She was conscious that I chafed at the restraint which she considered necessary, and was no doubt prepared for the serious step I had resolved on. Nevertheless, when the night came, it was not without a sense of

shame at breaking away from one who had been so tender and forbearing that I sidled past her where she sat outside the earth playing with my sisters. I had rather expected she would exercise her authority and call me back. Though she stopped her gambols and looked wistfully at me, she made no protest, and I passed on my way unchallenged; but I was glad when the bushes hid me from her sight and from the questioning eyes of my sisters, who seemed astounded at my going off alone.

Soon after crossing the stream I began to rehearse the plan I had surreptitiously formed in the earth. As it promised success, I decided to go through with it, though a darker night would have suited my purpose better. Clouds indeed there were, but white and fleecy, only slightly veiling the light of the full moon, which shone very brightly as it crossed the deep blue spaces between. The self-confidence I felt in the earth had been oozing out of me as I threaded my lonely way through brake and reed-bed, but it returned when, after trotting across the quaking bog that trembled under my light steps like a jelly-fish, I came at last in sight of the pool where I intended to lie in wait for wild-fowl.

Although I had taken a short cut over the

treacherous morass to forestall the duck, I feared that they might have settled in the water before I reached my ambush, and it was with eager eyes that I scanned the surface from a clump of rushes on a finger of land that jutted a little way into the pool. All was well! Not a bird floated on the open water between the beds of lilies or in the lanes between the floating grasses. The only things that caught my eye were a moorhen and the trail of light she left behind her as she swam the gloomy water, which was shadowed by some alders.

Crossing the baked and cracked mud left exposed by the sunken pool, I entered the water, swam over to the islet, and secreted myself on the margin of a tiny creek just above a line of stranded feathers. There, screened from the keen eyes of flighting wildfowl, I began my vigil with all the hope that waits on inexperience. Crouching beneath my ambush, I heard a few distant cries, which came, I should think, from birds feeding on the edge of the tide. So faint were they as to be audible only when the fitful breeze lulled and the tall, feathery reeds about the pool ceased rustling.

Presently, from the water between two lily-beds a silvery fish jumped thrice in quick succession, as if

pursued by some invisible foe; of the latter I saw no sign, unless its presence was indicated by a swirl in the water near where the fish fell. The long silence which followed was broken at last by a swish of wings—an inspiriting sound after the tedious wait—and some wild-fowl wheeled in a wide circle above my head before settling on one of the many pools that glistened on the wide marshland below them. As I lost the sound, I feared that the birds had dropped in elsewhere, but round they came again, and, with a splash that made me tingle with excitement, a mallard and three ducks alighted on the water midway between the islet and the reeds. They were evidently ill at ease, though they seemed to me so secure that I could not imagine what they could be so suspicious of—certainly not of the peregrine that harassed them at sunrise; and at the time I knew nothing of the monster pike that tenanted the pool, and took toll of feather as well as of fin. Could it be that they had got some inkling of my presence? I crouched absolutely motionless whilst their restless eyes searched the tangle on the island, and when they stared at the patch where I was hiding I scarcely dared to breathe.

Before settling down to feed they cruised restlessly

up and down, and even whilst they gobbled the green weed they kept looking so persistently my way that I began to think they could scent me, though they had only bills for noses. I had marked the mallard for my prey. He was a plump bird, and I had to keep my tongue from licking my lips at the prospect of the feast; for he was very tempting to an appetite sated of rabbit, and by this time I knew every feather of the plumage that covered his juicy flesh. Just then it vexed me to hear the vixen's call, far off though it was, as I feared she might hit my trail, follow it, and spoil my hunting. Her yapping caused all four birds to raise their heads and listen, but they showed no further sign of alarm, as every creature of the wild knows that dead silence precedes the kill and that it need have no dread of a noisy fox.

The ducks were near enough now for me to see the least movement of the mallard's eyes, the white of which, even when his head was down, showed that he was in deadly fear of something. 'Fool!' thought I, 'eat your supper in peace; but when you land on the mud of the creek, where lie yesternight's imprints of your webbed feet, then look about you.'

And yet I was mistaken; at that instant an enemy was within a few yards of him. I had warning of its approach, for I saw the moonlight catch a heave of the water, just as from the cliff I had seen it catch the glassy surface of the curling wave; but in my inexperience I never dreamt that the glint could be caused by a rival for the bird. I was now to learn better, as with a great flapping of wings and a loud quack the mallard disappeared below the surface. I remember nothing about the three ducks for I nearly jumped out of my skin; and my stupefaction was complete when I saw a big animal appear at the surface and leave the water with the mallard in his mouth.

The sight of this brute with my bird enraged me so much that at first I was on the point of springing across the creek and taking it from him. I would have done so had he been only half his size, but I was afraid of the strong, queer-looking creature. His body was very long, his legs short but massive, and his tail, which tapered to a point, stretched across the mud and just touched the water. He had no ears—at least, nothing worth the name; his eyes were small, his whiskers very long and white, and his jaws so heavy that they

frightened me. How he enjoyed the mallard, the rascal! How his beady eyes gleamed until he saw me back out of my ambush! and then what an evil look rose to them! That was enough to scare me without the frightful grimace and hissing that accompanied it.

I lost no time in getting out of sight of such a horror. I crossed the pool, dreading at every stroke that the fearsome beast would seize me from beneath, as he had seized the mallard, pull me under, and—disgusting thought!—perhaps eat me. I looked back on landing, and again when I reached the reeds; then, as I saw no trace of him and had dry land in front, I cursed him to my heart's content. I had been deprived of my supper in the last watch of the night, and it would take me all my time to reach the earth before dawn, even by way of the quaking bog. I gnashed my strong teeth as I hurried across the fen, swearing that I would be avenged on that thief if chance threw me in his way again; and though a fox may not be able to choose place and time, he generally gets his wrongs righted in the end. I own that for the moment the sight of the strong, fierce brute must have unnerved me; why else should the rustling of

a vole on the bank of our own stream scare me so and cause me to run home in breathless haste?

When I reached the earth the vixen and my sisters were lying near the entrance, looking as happy and contented as mother and whelps can look. With misfortune written on my crestfallen face, I stood before them bedraggled and panting, as complete a picture of misery as can well be imagined. My mother looked me up and down with sympathetic eyes that told her thoughts, and though she never said a word I read in their varying expressions: 'You are miserable and discomfited, my cub; you are evidently paying dear for your freedom. Nevertheless I admire your independence and, for all your wayward spirit, I am proud of you.'

Crimson streaks marked the low sky to the east before I followed the others to the den for, rather than retire supperless, I stayed outside to crunch a few dry bones. It had been a most unsatisfactory night's hunting, and, though I tried hard to get the evil-looking brute with the webbed feet out of my mind, I seemed, even till I fell asleep, to be watching that rascally otter lying his full

length and holding in his fore-paws the fattest mallard I had ever seen.

Despite my disappointment and fear, I resolved to visit the fen again a few nights later, and it vexed me greatly when the vixen objected and insisted that I should join her and my sisters in an expedition to the hill beyond it. I was sulky at the start, and lagged behind the others all the way across the marshland, but I closed up when we breasted the hill, and shook off the last traces of ill-temper on seeing the vixen steal towards an enclosed field some little distance down from the crest. I watched her closely whilst she reconnoitred at a gap in the rude stone wall, and, from the fixity of her gaze, felt almost sure that she espied game. All doubt was dispelled when, with the stealthiest of movements, she came back to me and, as if I was the most amiable cub in the world and worthy of the post of honour, led me round to the meuse through which the game had entered the field, and left me to watch it.

As I lay there, within a spring of the scent-tainted run that recalled a trail I had once followed on the fen, I became uncontrollably curious to see the animal that had but shortly before passed along

it. I felt sure the creature was in the field, and no sooner had the vixen disappeared round the corner of the long wall than I left my hiding-place, crawled up the face of the enclosure as quietly as a fly, and peeped through a break in the top whence a stone had fallen. Ah! there he was, for all the world like an immense rabbit, nibbling the clover right out in the middle of the square field. Of course I ought to have returned to my ambush at once, but curiosity held me to the spot, and whilst I was taking a last look, I caught sight of the vixen stealing over the wall on the further side into the tangle that filled the corner and, in fact, grew all round the field at the foot of the wall. In this she was lost to view, till presently her mask appeared again between some seeding thistles about thirty yards from the unsuspicious hare.

Now began one of the most thrilling stalks I ever witnessed, though, owing to the astonishing way the vixen hid herself, I could see little of her but her ears. To have rendered herself so inconspicuous she must have grovelled along on her belly in some slight hollow of the ground not visible to me; for the clover was not more than

an inch high and of itself afforded very little concealment. The nearer she got the more excited I became; and for the life of me I could not understand—even now I cannot understand—why the hare, of all animals the timidest and most watchful, neither saw, heard, nor scented her. Inch by inch the clever little stalker wound her way until nearer approach without discovery must have been impossible. I was wondering why she delayed making one of her lightning-like rushes, when, with a tremendous bound, the hare started off in a direction wide of my station. The vixen, who was in swift pursuit, made a desperate effort to turn him; but in this she would have failed, despite her wonderful fleetness, had not my little sister, whether by accident or design I do not know, suddenly showed herself at the gate for which the hare was heading. This had the effect of sending him towards the meuse I had been set to watch and of reminding me of my duty.

The hare was yet some thirty yards down the hill but coming like the wind, when I dropped quietly into my ambush and gathered my legs under me. What a row he made as he dashed through the brambles and came through the hole

at the foot of the wall! Never shall I forget the excitement of the moment when, with his ears thrown back on his shoulders, he came in sight. I made my spring as he flashed by, and though I only knocked him over, I was on him and broke his back before he could recover himself. The vixen, who came up the next moment, was delighted to find me standing over my first hare; and when in response to her call my sisters joined us, she distributed the portions into which she had broken it up. There was much chattering over the feast—the contented chattering that attends good hunting.

Thus did our mother teach us to act in concert—the method sometimes employed by dog and vixen if hares are scarce and wild, but more commonly adopted when driving rabbits from a brake where there are no holes in which they can get to ground.

Our supper over, the vixen led us along the crest of the hill to a small clump of wind-clipt pines, which are still standing, whence can be obtained a view of the fen on the one side and of the sand-hills on the other. This was my first sight of the dunes and of the farm-buildings on the edge of them. Whilst we stood there a loud bark,

"HIS BEADY EYES GLEAMED." *Page 43.*

thrice repeated, came from within the trees about the buildings.

'What is that?' I asked, somewhat alarmed.

'That is the voice of a dog—the voice of an enemy.'

Then she warned us never under any circumstances to go near the place, 'for,' said she, 'danger lurks there, and perhaps death.'

Wise little mother, if I had only heeded thy warning, what anguish and degradation I might have been spared!

Day was already dawning, and I wondered that she so long delayed returning to the earth. To jog her memory I kept glancing first at her and then at the eastern sky, but to my surprise she took no notice. Her face was very sad, and she seemed lost in thought. I believe she was thinking of the time, now close at hand, when we must separate from her and face the dangers of life alone.

But it was not her intention to go back to the cairn, for on reaching the foot of the hill she turned aside and brought us to another earth, before which lay an enormous heap of yellowish soil. This, as it proved, was to be our new home; and from the fresh trail that led to it, I judged that at least one animal would share it with us.

CHAPTER III

FRIENDS AND FOES

A LITTLE way inside the entrance, which was a large one, the tunnel divided; and when the vixen and my sisters disappeared in the branch leading to the left, I, curious to see our new neighbour, followed the trail along the other. On and on I stole through a low winding passage, which penetrated so far that I thought I should never reach the object of my search.

At last I came on his lair at a spot where the tunnel suddenly widened, and the sight of it made me stand agape. Instead of the bare ground, which is a fox's couch, and on which I expected to see the creature curled up, before me rose a great heap of dried grass that filled the chamber from side to side, and reached almost to the roof. So effectually did it conceal its occupant that not a

hair of him could I see. The slight rustling of the bed would have told me he was there, even had my nostrils not given me undeniable proof of his presence; and as my curiosity, now thoroughly aroused, would not let me retire before I had had at least a glimpse of the creature, I drew near with the utmost caution, craned my neck over the broad edge, and looked down on him.

My eye! he was a monster. It surprised me to see how big he was; but what really took me aback was his very pale colour, which showed even in the darkness of the den. I had expected to see a gray creature, like the badger on the cliffs, and not a white one nearly twice his size. My first impulse was to retreat, but on regaining my composure, I resolved to stay and have a good look at him.

His broad side rose and fell with his slow, heavy breathing; his eye—I could see but one—was closed, and there was no sign of vigilance about the small limp ears. To all appearance he was in a deep sleep, which I believed, as well I might, that I had done nothing to disturb. For if my approach had been as noiseless as the incoming of the fresh air that sweetens the close atmosphere of our dens, not less so was my examination of the formidable

creature, though it was made with breathless wonderment.

Yet before I could bark in his ear and run away, as I was tempted to do, he sprang suddenly to his feet with a loud snarl, which nearly frightened me out of my skin. Fortunately, he did not snap at me as I drew back, or pursue me as I bolted at full speed along the tunnel; indeed, judging from his subsequent conduct, I should say that his venerable face was one grin from ear to ear when he discovered it was a chit of a fox cub that had scared him.

My mother, whom the loud snarl had brought in hot haste to my side, was very angry with me for trespassing on the badger's private quarters instead of following her into the part of the sett she had appropriated. No doubt it was a foolish thing to intrude on the privacy of so powerful an animal; but I had no occasion to regret my misconduct, for the badger, far from resenting it, became my best friend. Every morning after that I used to peep at him; but instead of creeping in stealthily, as I had done at first, I walked in as if I were going to my own den, and to apprise him of my approach gave a stifled bark on reaching the turn by the rock,

beyond which a short length of straight tunnel led to his lair. Though I seldom neglected to warn him of my coming I believe it was unnecessary, as he got to know my light footstep so well that he did not take the trouble to raise his head on the rare occasions when I forgot to signal my approach. Sleepy though he always was after his night's round, he never failed to wink at me with the eye that was uppermost. Sometimes he would wink twice; but beyond that he never got.

He must have been a good fellow, this distinguished member of the oldest family amongst animals, to put up with these dawn visits of a fox who was still under the partial tutelage of his mother. I have often wondered why he did so, but never been quite sure. If I may give my reason—and be it understood that it involves no slur on the badger's fame—I should say it was because of his friendless state. I say 'friendless,' inasmuch as he was never seen in company with the only other badger in the countryside, the one that dwelt on the cliffs; and he kept quite aloof from the other creatures of the wild.

I have always felt proud that he should have thought me worthy of the least consideration; but

this did not make me blind to his faults. I don't refer to his living on beetles and wasp-grubs, nor do I mean the trick of sleeping with one paw in his mouth, or the queer way he had of running backwards into the earth, at which little game I once surprised him; no, I am thinking of a bad habit from which we suffered much annoyance, and which I am very loth to mention, much less dwell on. But it must be stated, and at some length, on account of my story; it was this: he could not keep his claws from digging.

What made his offence ten times worse in our ears was that, as far as our vulpine wits could enlighten us—and we discussed the matter again and again—there was no necessity for his self-imposed labour. Any reasonable creature would have thought the sett was more than complete, inasmuch as the part of the hill it tunnelled in all directions was like a vast honey-comb. It held quarters for a whole swarm of badgers; and yet the old fellow must needs keep burrowing farther and farther in, opening out more chambers and galleries, as if it were not commodious enough for his individual requirements. Of course he was free to add to the accommodation of the sett, whether

he really did feel cramped for room or only imagined that he did; nevertheless we foxes accounted it a grievance to have to put up with the din he made in digging, which, as it reverberated along the hollow ways, resembled the rumbling of thunder more than any other sound, and prevented us from getting a wink of sleep in the long, dragging hours during which it lasted.

This was only the first stage of the annoyance. A more serious trouble was the way the great heap kept on increasing with the excavated soil that he fetched out by the barrow-load about once a week on the average, generally in the small hours of the morning when we were away foraging. The enormous mound made us hang our heads in shame every time we passed in and out. And as if this were not enough to betray us to our enemies, on our return home one morning we found his great bed lying atop of the pile, which now looked like a haycock in the midst of the brake. At the sight of this my mother lost her temper, and heaped such unrestrained abuse on the badger that I could not keep my jaws closed. It pains me to this day to remember that I dared reply to her; but how, when my old friend was

attacked in such bitter terms, could I honourably keep silence? That day I had to be content with the draughty corner of the den, apart from my mother and sisters, who edged away from me as if I were mangy. I spent miserable hours lying there; but about noon the vixen walked over to me, licked my face with her hot tongue, and curled up by my side. These tender attentions soothed my injured feelings, and I soon fell into a peaceful sleep.

I do not reproach the badger for changing his bed, I cannot reproach him for his cleanliness, and I have no wish to disparage his great industry; my object is to set down the truth, or what I believe to be the truth; and I think that this corpulent creature had to make work to keep his fat down and, even in times of famine, to dig willy-nilly to prevent his claws from growing into his flesh.

Of course, had the matter of digging by day, in which lay the sting of the underground annoyance, been brought to an issue, we foxes had not a shadow of right on our side; because we knew that the earth belonged to the badger by right of excavation, and that we were there on sufferance only as long as he

"HOW THE CHASE ENDED I COULD NOT SEE." *Page 63.*

found us tolerant and agreeable. We did well to endure what we could not cure, for, had it come to a quarrel, to a conflict with tooth and claw, the badger could have made mincemeat of our whole party without sustaining a scratch. So we prudently refrained from making any comment in his hearing, and, as he could read nothing from my looks, he had not the faintest suspicion of the grumbling to which I had to listen, or of the difficult part I had to play to keep on good terms with my family.

So things went on until a common trouble befell both the badger and ourselves, and immediately following it, calamities so dire as almost to dwarf into nothingness the annoyances of which so much had been made.

We had frequented the sett for perhaps a month, when, on returning early one morning from hunting on the moors, we found, to our astonishment, the entrances to the earth blocked and the badger shut out. Thought I, 'This misfortune to himself and to us is the result of his misdoings,' and I fully expected to see the vixen pour out the vials of her wrath; but, to my surprise, all she did was to cruise up and down in a fever of anxiety, with a watchful eye on the desperate efforts the badger was making

to remove the faggots jammed into the hole. Failing to remove them by tugging, he began to bite through the thick, tough stems as though they were reeds; and in my inexperience I thought he would soon succeed in chopping a way in. But whoever had placed the faggots there had done his work too well for the entry to be hurriedly effected, so that gray dawn found the badger but little advanced with his stubborn task and us cubs roaming restlessly about, eyeing him at his work.

The only time I got in his way he turned his nervous face and snarled at me as though I were a stranger. Seeing what deadly earnest he was in, I gave him a wide berth, and sat on the top of the heap with my brush to him, blinking at the sky that was now all red as if the cliffs were a-fire far, far away beyond the fen. Every now and again, when the vixen came my way, I caught her casting uneasy glances towards the east, and the instant the glaring rim of the sun showed, she stole away and we in her train, leaving my old friend biting and pounding in his apparently hopeless toil.

If his efforts looked hopeless, the journey before us was certainly disagreeable. I shall not soon forget that crossing of the fen, which, as bad luck

would have it, was as free from mist as the gilded crests of the tor that seemed to stare at us belated creatures of the night, abroad at such an uncanny hour. The vixen took advantage of every bit of cover within easy reach of the bee-line to the cairn earth, for which she was making; but for all that, there were many exposed places that could not be avoided, and there the cruel sun had us at his mercy, and blinded us with his naked rays. Nor were we alone in our misfortune. Half-way over, at a spot where the glittering pools lay thickest, we met a vixen and four cubs heading straight for our sett. She, too, was all anxiety; and seeing this, I began to wonder why the stopping of an earth should occasion such widespread consternation.

My dear mother traversed the mossy spaces between the pools at the utmost speed of the weakly cub by her side, whilst my sister and I followed a little to one side, so as to avoid treading on the long, terrifying shadows they cast. On coming within sight of the earth she stopped suddenly in her stride, and as she did so my astonished eyes lighted on the object which had arrested her steps. It was the enemy—it was man. I recognised him at first sight, unlike though he was

to the being I had vaguely imagined. There is no reason for surprise that I did. For what beast of the field or wild stands erect with such ease on his hind-feet, or has face, fore-paws and ears as bare of fur as is the skin of a mangy fox? Moreover, I caught his scent; and it was the same scent as had tainted the stone on the cliff, that tainted the faggots—evidence hardly less convincing than the steady gaze of his eyes and the shout he raised. At the awful sound we turned tail and melted into the brake.

Round and round the great furze cover we stole, until I thought that the vixen would never come to a standstill; but at last she chose for sanctuary a tangled corner near a runnel, and there, amidst the russet bracken, my weary sisters curled themselves up and fell asleep.

Whether the vixen slept at all I cannot say, but I do not think she did, for she was wide awake when I dropped off, and she was all eyes and ears when I was startled out of my sleep by three noisy wood-pigeons overhead. As we looked at one another across the tiny stream, a strange sound reached me from the direction of the wood below the tor, or, it might be, from the tor itself. It was

a high-pitched note, very penetrating, and a little like a cock's crow, though differing from it even more than a curlew's whistle does from an otter's. The instant I heard it I knew that it came from no bird's throat, but whence it came I could not tell.

What a simpleton I was at that time! how ignorant in my inexperience! The toot of the horn is as familiar to me now as the clatter of shod horses on man's trail or the sight of a pink coat. I know, too, now what it portends; but at that moment, though fear was mingled with my curiosity, I should not have been very uneasy, save for the obvious anxiety of my mother. Not that she fussed about as if flurried, but I could see her alarm in her unusual alertness. When a cock-pheasant flew past and skimmed the brake that mantled the steep slope below us, her eyes followed it with an eagerness that seemed to demand from it the secret of its startled flight.

Again the horn sounded, this time from the neighbourhood of the withered oak between us and the tor. Then I heard a horse galloping and saw a flash of scarlet at the foot of the slope where the pheasant had dropped in. What did it all mean? Were we foxes in any way concerned in the

unwonted proceedings that were disturbing the great silence that had till then brooded over the cover? The suspense, the uncertainty, which the vixen's evident distress intensified, the vague sense of danger, were painful; but all doubts were soon dispelled. 'Eloo in! Hi, Forester! hi, Troubadour! Eloo in!' The rasping yell with which this was uttered betokened some sinister happening, though we looked in vain to the vixen, round whom my sisters gathered, to enlighten us as to its nature.

At this point my recollection is blurred, save for two things, the crashing noise in the brake and the flight of the vixen and my sisters along the water-course, with the pack in pursuit. I shall always hear the one and see the other. If ever I was terrified in my life it was then; and between the clamour of the hounds and the thundering tread of a hundred galloping horses I was so bewildered that I knew not where to turn. But as the noise died away my nerves steadied, and, rising from my crouching attitude, I peeped through the furze to try to discover what was happening. For a long time I could see nothing in the deserted valley below; but, continuing my watch, I perceived the vixen and my little sister coming along the open

bank of the stream, with the leading hounds in close pursuit and apparently gaining at every stride.

I am too old now to feel strongly as I did then, but still I am affected at the recollection of the vixen striving to save my sister by devices such as a partridge will employ to divert an enemy from its young. How the chase ended I could not see; but the sudden ceasing of the clamour made me fear the worst.

In the silence that succeeded I made for the cairn earth, expecting to get in there; but that, too, was stopped. Whilst I was debating what to do, I heard the huntsman's voice, and had scarcely regained my old station by the watercourse when the hounds opened on my line. They were coming towards me at a great pace. Without an instant's delay I was off, and, stealing down the long slope, reached the edge of the cover, where I checked my steps to look out and see that the coast was clear. Except the blazing sunlight, there was nothing in the bottom or on the bare slope beyond to scare me, and as the hounds were half-way down the hill, I committed myself to the open.

I had not got far when there was a scream, a

human scream, fit to wake the dead. It startled me horribly, but did not cause me to deviate a hair's-breadth from the direction in which I had set my head. Near the brow I stopped and looked back at the crowd of dogs and horsemen. It puzzled me then, it puzzles me yet, to know why they should wish to kill me, but I had not a doubt that was their object. The clamour did not greatly terrify me at that stage of the chase, as I felt sure I should be able to elude my pursuers in the fen for which I was making.

I held about the same lead across the next valley and up the hill beyond, but the heat of the sun was beginning to tell on me before I reached the wide belt of rushes near the mere. When I had crossed it the hounds had greatly reduced the distance between us; I was beginning to flag, and the sanctuary I sought was nearly two miles away. The going was heavy over the marshland, where never a breath stirred, but I struggled on as best I could towards the islet of my favourite pool, spreading terror amongst grebe and hern along the silent ways I threaded.

At length I gained the pool, and as I left the finger of land jutting towards the islet and took

to the water, I felt I was near an asylum at last. Vain hope! When I was barely half-way across an accursed magpie espied me, and came and hovered just over my head, making a loud chattering noise that the hounds must have heard. I looked straight before my muzzle, pretending to take no notice of the plague, and as soon as I landed, lay down in my old ambush that half concealed me from the exasperating bird. 'The pest will surely hold his tongue now that I am in lair,' thought I. But no; he chattered louder than ever, as if it delighted him to betray me to the pack, whose whimpering I could now hear. In my exhausted condition I was very loth to move, but, seeing that to remain there was certain death, I left my hiding-place and plunged into the water on the further side of the islet. My tormentor came with me, and never shall I forget his harsh, jeering cries whilst I swam to the nearest alders, and even whilst I made my slow way through the sparse thorns that ran up to the furze about the earth. Under the close brake I was free from the traitor, and it cheered me to be so near the sett and a safe refuge. As I followed the beaten track leading to it I was indifferent to my

pursuers, for I felt sure that the badger must long ere this have opened a way in.

Alas! it had proved beyond his powers. The ground about the faggots was littered with the bits he had chopped off, but he had failed to effect an entry. Realizing my desperate position, I almost gave myself up for lost. Fortunately, in my extremity—and a fox's brain is never clearer than then—I wondered where the badger had bestowed himself. Where he could get I could get, and if I could only trace him I might, despite the stiffness of my limbs and the nearness of the hounds, even yet escape with my life.

Picking up his trail, I followed it along the base of the hill to a thicket, dense and matted as bramble, blackthorn and furze could make it. Through this I passed until I reached a small cave at the foot of a sheer wall of rock. The trail led inwards, and at the very back I came on my friend. He looked most vicious at first; but when he recognised the bedraggled cub before him, the expression of his venerable face quickly changed to one of compassion, and then again to hate as he heard the hounds, now running mute, crash through the undergrowth. It was an awful moment. It

behoved me to find, and that instantly, some secure position out of reach of the infuriated pack. The leading hounds were at the mouth of the cave when, by a last effort, I gained a scanty ledge, almost too narrow for foothold, a little way above the badger's head. I was never in a more desperate position, but fear glued me to the spot; and better vantage-ground for viewing the fight that followed could not have been. 'Keep cool,' I shouted to my old friend as well as I could for panting; and before I could repeat my warning, given as much for his own sake as for my own, the hounds were on him.

There are things which seem incredible unless witnessed; and I would not now submit the evidence of my own eyes did I not feel it my bounden duty to record the facts which redound to the fame of the badger and to the glory of the wild. But how is it possible to describe what happened so that the picture presented may approach in vividness the savage scene I looked down on? I have seen the waves dash and dash again into a cavern, only to be as often rolled back till the tide had spent its force and left the cave as silent as at first. The inrush of the pack was like the on-

coming of an irresistible wave ; but the badger, with his back to the low arch, was not to be overwhelmed whilst he could keep his feet and ply jaw and claw. Only three hounds could get at him at a time; and when it came to deadly fang work, what were these soft creatures of the kennel to the most formidable beast of the brake? As fast as the badger could deal with them, hound after hound withdrew howling, till there was scarcely one of the twenty couple composing the pack on whom his terrible jaws had not closed.

Whilst the fray was at its height the badger was at times partly hidden under his assailants, and thus arose no small danger to myself. One big brute of a hound there was who espied me where I stood, still as if carved in stone, save for my heaving flank and lolling tongue. This must have caught his eye, and time after time he leapt at me from the backs of the writhing mass below ; but for want of steady foothold, he failed as often to reach me. The last time he fell he slipped between two hounds, and the badger had him at his mercy. It did my ears good to hear him howl ; and no sooner did the badger let him go than he retreated over the backs of the hounds

behind with a celerity which did credit even to his long legs. Through the creeper that half curtained the mouth of the cave I saw him take up his station amongst the rearmost ranks of those hounds who were baying their loudest from the brambles.

Shortly after this one of two mounted men, whose progress was arrested by the thicket, jumped from his horse and plunged into the tangle. Only his hot face and bald head showed above the brake as he came slowly along, cracking his whip as best he could for the briers that reached to his neck and clung to his red sleeve. Whilst he fought his way through, the other kept screaming at the top of his voice: 'Whip 'em off! whip 'em off! The brute 'll murder my best hounds!' The huntsman had no difficulty in whipping off the cowardly crew of howlers outside; but it was no easy task to call off the staunch hounds that, despite the terrible punishment they were receiving, would have carried on the fight until they dropped from exhaustion. At last he succeeded, remounted his horse, and rode away with the other.

In the silence that ensued my position appeared to me still most unenviable. Would the badger,

on whom I had brought all this trouble, avenge himself on me for the wrong I had done him? I tried to read his intentions, but he gave no sign. Presently he looked up at me, and in fear and trembling I returned his gaze. A wild light blazed in his black eyes, but no trace of rage against myself. Then I took courage, though obliged to look away from his blood-stained face, so horrible was the sight it presented. His must have been a noble nature to bear such punishment without resentment, and I am glad he never guessed my fears.

How I wronged this chivalrous old aristocrat in thinking it possible he could use his giant strength to crush the life out of a helpless cub! The old fellow was as friendly as though nothing had happened when, at last, falling rather than leaping, I came down from my perch to try to find relief from the cramp that was knotting my muscles. His awful panting had by that time somewhat subsided; but I was truly sorry to see him in such a deplorable state, and I suppose I showed it in my face, for he said: 'Do not grieve on my account, little brother. I shall soon recover from my scratches.'

My legs were too stiff to let me lie down, so I stood by his side whilst he licked his wounds and smoothed his ruffled coat, and at nightfall, when he left, I staggered after him as best I could. After drinking at a spring on the way, we came to the earth, from the mouth of which, as I rejoiced to see, the faggots had been removed. There the badger left me and went up the hill toward the farm-land over which he wandered nearly every night in search of food. At what time he returned I do not know, as I did not awake till late the following afternoon, when I was aroused from my deep sleep by the noise he made on resuming his excavations.

CHAPTER IV

CAPTIVITY

THERE are some things which I would gladly be silent about, but which are necessary to the completeness of my story.

Chief of these are the grievous losses on that day's cub-hunting. My little sister and—sadder still—my dear mother were killed by the hounds. It was best they should die together, for the cub was so dependent on the vixen, and the vixen so inseparable from the cub, that I am sure they could not have lived happily apart. Our common trouble drew my surviving sister and myself closer to each other, and for a few weeks we lived together in the earth, though we went our several ways at night, and very seldom hunted in concert.

The close of this period is marked by an event of great moment to myself, which, though it does

not redound to my credit, must be told in some detail.

It is necessary first to state that for some reason the hounds gave up coming to our country, and that in their place a murderous gang of ruffians infested the district, and by traps, by poisoned carcasses, by terriers, by digging and by filling the earths with smoke, succeeded in destroying nearly every fox in the countryside. Fortunately, our earth proved impregnable to the spade and proof against smoke; whilst the badger made such havoc with the dogs that were sent against us that, after two determined but futile assaults, we were left in peace. For a time we had to exercise the utmost caution in avoiding the numerous traps, which were artfully concealed in the runs leading from the earth; but afterwards these were removed, and we might roam without molestation over our desolate wilds.

Hares had been all but exterminated, and rabbits and wild-fowl so shot down and thinned that it was hard to get a living. As it turned out, I had better have starved than have brought the most humiliating of fates upon myself by hankering after forbidden birds, but at last my necessities

tempted me to that most perilous of undertakings, a raid on the poultry of the neighbouring farm. Besides the everlasting crowing of the cocks, I had heard the noise made by the flocks of housed turkeys, geese, and ducks, as I returned at dawn from the empty warren on the dunes; and this had set me longing for them.

I did not enter lightly on this my first foray, which I knew to be fraught with danger. My plans were laid with the fullest deliberation, and in the deep silence of my den I carefully thought out every step in my expedition. One of the strong points of a fox is attention to details. We go over and over every turn, we weigh every chance, and try to foresee every contingency. Indecision and flurry are not in our nature; we know what we are going to do, and we go coolly through with it. Our best-laid schemes may and do miscarry at times; nevertheless, with the over-confidence of cubhood, I really thought that the precautions I meant to take excluded all risks to my skin. Why, I had mapped out in my brain every inch of the incursion; I had selected the best way of approach; I was prepared with the safest line of retreat; and, what is of no small moment,

I had arranged for the disposal of the kill, which was likely to be a big one.

Eager as I was to realize my sanguine expectations, I twice postponed my visit, hoping for the cover of a storm that threatened; but on the third night, though the weather had cleared, I resolved to defer the raid no longer. The crescent moon was just above the tor when I stretched myself at the mouth of the earth and set out to put my well-matured plans into execution. I walked up the rugged hillside with all the circumspection and gravity becoming a great undertaking, and stayed awhile on the crest to reconnoitre the scene of my operations. The farm-house, the outbuildings, the yards, were all silent. No foot stirred, no bark of dog broke the stillness which brooded over the rugged slope, the smooth fields, and the endless waste of sand beyond.

Satisfied that the coast was clear, I made my way down the hill by a path my pads had laid—for I was on my trail leading to the dunes—and, keeping to the shelter of a hedge of blackthorns, reached the wall under the elms. Over it I crawled to the lower yard where the big pool is. Its muddy edge was white with stranded feathers,

and so was the track leading past the mow-hay, where rats were rustling in the straw. But I left them behind, and with stealthy stride reached the scene of action. A cock, unsuspicious of my presence, crowed in the first house I came to, but the door was a new one, and a weasel could not have got under it; so I passed in disgust to the next shed, which contained the turkeys. But if the hen-house was effectually closed, the turkey-house was hermetically sealed, and I thought that the farmer must be a cruel brute not to give the poor birds better ventilation.

'They would be but dry eating, even if I could get them,' said I, as I crossed the deeply-rutted road to the big house where my nose told me the geese were shut up. This building boasted a tall chimney, which made it look quite lofty; but it was on a small hole in the bottom of the door, from which came the goodliest of smells, that I fixed my attention, and without a moment's delay I set about enlarging it. The wood round it was very rotten, but I could not make the opening as big as I wished, on account of a piece of iron which was fastened across the door on the inside, some five or six inches above the level of the ground. Whilst

I was at work the cackling inside was deafening; and when, by a furious effort, I squeezed my way in, I found myself in a veritable pandemonium. I really think that geese take their troubles more noisily than any birds in the world, except, perhaps, guinea-fowls; and I, who love quiet, would have left them severely alone if I could have got at the fowls or the turkeys. Their clumsy wings, too, can make you see stars if they catch you fairly across the eyes, as theirs caught me more than once before my work was done.

Now it is one thing to slay in hot blood, another to tell at your ease what happened. I will merely say that the lust for slaughter was strong in me, and that in a short time all the flock but one lay dead on the stone floor.

Not an instant did I waste before setting about the next step in my projected night's work, the removal of the biggest bird to the dune I had chosen for my cache. I hoped to take all—it could be done—but I would make sure of the best. My grandest victim was the gander. I had pulled him out from under two geese, and was bearing him over the bodies of the flock towards the door, when,

to my horror, I saw that the hole had been stopped from the outside.

While the killing went on I had been deaf to everything, and I believe that a waggon might have passed through the yard without my noticing it. But now I became alive to every sound. I dropped the gander and listened. At first I could hear nothing but the thumping of my own heart, still affected by the speed of the kill ; but presently the silence was broken by the sound of a man's footsteps on the stones at the back of the house. A few minutes later I heard the heavy tread on the roof, whereat I fell into a state of abject terror, which caused me to run round and round the walls like a rat in a trap.

My enemy did not remain long, and when he came down he made for the farm-house, muttering as he went. Now, thought I, is the moment to regain my freedom. Escape by the door seemed out of the question ; a small paneless window through which I could see a single star was hopelessly beyond my reach ; but a third outlet, the chimney, remained, and by it I might find deliverance.

Here I met with an unexpected, but not insuperable, difficulty ; for a foot or so up, the flue was

choked with old nests. I closed my eyes whilst I pulled them down; but the suffocating dust, which there was no draught to carry away, compelled me to return every now and again to the floor to breathe. This inconvenience, however, was a mere trifle, and after drawing a few breaths I returned to my work. It cheered me to hear the débris falling, and to know that every stroke of my fore-paws brought me nearer to my liberty. Imagine my dismay, then, on discovering, after all my toil, that a flat stone capped the chimney and prevented my escape. Though it smelt abominably, I made frantic efforts to remove it. I pawed it, I bit it, I tried to raise it with the top of my poll, with my arched back, but place myself as I might, I could not find a position that enabled me to get good purchase owing to the width of the chimney. Had it been half an inch narrower, I might have managed to dislodge the stone, heavy though it was, for I had felt it yield a little when I made my greatest effort. But there was no result from what force I could use, and seeing that I was only wasting time and strength, I scrambled down the flue to the heap of fallen rubbish, which gave way under me and spread out over the floor.

The geese lay as I had left them. It was a big kill, and no mistake. The floor was white with birds, and in places they were two deep. As became a dog-fox I had done my work well, and the birds were all dead except one, which raised its head now and again in the far corner under the window. I had not the least inclination to touch it again, and though I must have been very hungry, I did not think of eating. I was in a trap; I knew it, so did my enemy, and I knew that he knew it. That he would return at daybreak I felt sure, and that he would kill me I had little doubt. At the very thought I grovelled with fear among the bodies of my victims, until the determination to live aroused me to fresh exertions. In my desperation I tried to bite away the nails that studded the sound wood about the hole by which I had entered; I tried to dig my way under the door, but I did not succeed in dislodging a single stone. Oh for half an hour of my friend the badger! I made frantic, unavailing leaps at the open window; I cruised round and round the walls until I must have travelled miles; time after time I scrambled up the chimney, only in the end to resume my aimless rounds. At length, weary with my endeavours,

continued through many hours, I lay down again, panting, amongst the geese.

The stillness of that dead-house was profound. Outside, too, all was still, save for the soughing of the wind in the leafless elms. This was the voice of an old friend, and it soothed me somewhat till it brought back to my mind the picture of the reeds bending over the rippled surface of my favourite pool. At the thought of my freedom in the fen I jumped to my feet and tried again and again, without success, each possible outlet, and then once more lay down with heaving side and lolling tongue to wait for the end.

Presently a cock crowed; and at last dawn peeped through the window, and found me a more pitiable object than the old goose who squinted at me every time she raised her blood-stained head. It would be day soon, but as yet the light was gray. It was the hour that had oft-times surprised me in the midst of my hunting, and hurried me across the misty fen to my kennel in the brake; the hour when every carnivorous creature of the night steals by hidden ways to his retreat, and conceals himself from the cruel eye of day.

As the light grew stronger I found myself rising

involuntarily to my feet to return to the earth, but the strong walls compelled me to stay and await my fate. Soon a pale, rosy light suffused the sky, and presently the first beam of sunshine came in at my window and fell on an old spider's web stretched over a hole in the wall of the chimney. I envied the owner of the web: I envied the dead geese: I would at that moment have been even the broken starling's egg lying there on the waste-heap, or the skeleton of a fly dangling at the end of the gossamer.

I heard a door slammed and the noise of footsteps. They were deliberate, heavy, merciless, and they were approaching the door behind which I stood listening. Just when I expected to see it slightly opened, and was on the point of shamming to be dead, there was a loud kick against it which upset my plan and made me rush up the chimney.

'All dead, are 'ee?'

Then the door was unbarred and opened.

'Aye, all dead.'

After a pause the newcomer added:

'You're as putty a lot as ever I reared; in another month you'd have been ready for market, and I looked to 'ee to pay part of the rent.'

Then in a voice like thunder he bawled out:

'Where art thee, Mr. Slyboots? Ah, thee scoundrel, thee needn't try to get out by the chimbley! thee'rt wastin' thy precious time. I'll help thy lordship through the front door in a minute. An'rew, why are 'ee so long? Bring the sack here.'

Presently I heard two men below, and the door closed behind them.

'Putty old slaughter, An'rew?'

'Iss; a clean sweep seemingly.'

'He's up the chimbley and safe enuf. You hold the sack whilst I stir him up with this eer pole.'

Two awful thumps I endured without flinching, but the third knocked my hindlegs from under me, and I fell all of a heap into the bag.

'So far, so good. Now we'll tie a stone to the sack and drop the lot into the deep corner of the goslin' pool. The country's guv up, there's nobody to pay compensation, and the varmint must die. I'll go and fetch a bit of rope.'

Whilst the farmer was gone the man opened the mouth of the sack and looked down on me. Not satisfied, apparently, with the half light of the

outhouse, he took me into the open and peered at me again. I thought I recognised him the first time he inspected me; but now, with the morning sun on his ruddy cheeks I was quite sure. He was the first man I had seen, the man who was on the cairn the morning my mother was killed by the pack; he was the man who, I felt certain, had stopped the earths. I was calm now. I had gone through the agony of death, but still I did not want to die. Life was sweet, very sweet. I was not like a mangy old fox; I was in the pride of my cub-hood.

'What a beauty!' said the earth-stopper, as he continued to gaze at me. 'What a grand fox, to be sure! If An'rew can save 'ee, then thee shan't die, now there.'

How different was his voice from that of the gruff, ill-tempered farmer, whom I heard running up, and who seemed anxious to put an end to me.

'Look here, sir, just you take a peep at un, and tell me if you can drown such a fox as that.'

'Drown the varmint? Of course I can, and with an easy conscience; how can you dare ask me, with a score and a half of geese lying there?'

'Well, sir, there's no denying you've sore provo-

cation, and that the fox is yours to do what you like with ; but I tell you this, and I speak man to man, that the minute you throw him into that pond you and I part company. He is the finest young dog-fox I ever seed, and I couldn't work on the farm or pass that pond with a clane conscience, beknowing he'd been drownded in it. I tell 'ee I could not ; so choose !'

The man was out of breath when he had finished, his hand was trembling as I could feel by the shaking of the sack, and, in the silence which followed, he kept shifting from foot to foot.

'Well, An'rew,' said the farmer in a changed voice, 'you've quite took the breath out of me, you have. Dang it, if I know what to do ! You put me in a reg'lar quandary. If you were an ordinary servant, I should say "Clear !" But you must know that you are more to me than a servant, An'rew, you're a friend . . . There, take the cussed varmint, and do what you like with un, but don't 'ee leave un go free.'

Andrew's reply was slow and calm.

'Leave the fox to me, sir. I promise 'ee that he shaan't go free, and that he shaan't hurt another feather of your flocks again.'

'So you mean to keep un down at the cot. Well, well, An'rew, from a boy thee always were fond of stinkin' varmints; but, all the same, it do puzzle me that a man who has been stoppin' out foxes for twenty years for hounds to kill, should be willin' to throw up his place in these hard times to keep the laast of the pests alive. However, you're welcome to any scraps that's goin', an' there's a bar'l up in the yard and Jess's old chain and collar —ah, if she'd been alive!—but see that the varmint can't get his poll through, or he'll be havin' the prize turkeys next.'

'Won't 'ee look at un a minit, sir, before I take un away?'

Then two black eyes looked down at me from under bushy eyebrows, and, to my surprise, they were not cruel eyes. I saw this though my own eyes dropped almost immediately.

'Well, An'rew, he is a grand fox and no mistake. From the length of his hind leg, above and below the gambrel joint, and his make in general, he's my idea of a greyhound fox. And lor, what a tag he's got to his brush for a youngster! But there, take the varmint away. He's got a feather of one of my birds sticking to his off-lip; take un away!'

An hour later I was ensconced in the straw in the corner of a barrel placed with its mouth facing the door of my master's cottage. My life was spared, but my freedom was gone. When at last I recovered from the fright caused by fastening the brass collar about my neck, I crept forward to examine what I could see from just inside the mouth of my kennel. The cottage had two windows and a tiny dormer, and over the porch grew a creeper which reached to the thatch. On the sill of the lower window rested two big shells, and below it, within a fringe of pebbles which had been brought from the bar, was a small holly-bush with red berries on it. As I wanted to know what lay on each side of the cottage, I crept to the very mouth of the barrel and looked out. To the left was a small enclosure with a tamarisk fence about it. Through the wands I could see the slope of a sand dune under the shelter of which the cottage was built. On the other side was a stack of such wreckage as I had seen on the beach a month before, after a storm. Past this heap of wood, hedges of tamarisk met over a sloping path, and framed a bit of blue sea. After examining my surroundings I withdrew into my corner, but was

much too excited and unhappy to compose myself to sleep.

Just before dusk I heard my master's step, and presently he came round the corner of the house near the enclosure, and walked straight up to my kennel. There he knelt on the sand and peeped in on me.

'Now Vulp,' said he, 'maybe you look on me as your enemy, but I am not. I'm a man, 'tis true, but I'm your friend for all that. I'm the earth-stopper turned labourer, worse luck, because the hunt is given up, leastwise for the time bein', and savin' for the fen, I know the wild country you have roamed over, nearly as well as you do; and most like I stopped you out during the cub-huntin', and it may be from the earth where you were littered. If you could only speak what a lot we should have to talk about. I'd like to give you your liberty, you beauty, but I caan't, for I've guv my word, and you must abide by it. I've brought 'ee a rabbit, Eat it now and drink up the water which I see you havn't touched, and be a good fox.'

Without rising from his knees he took some stones out of his pocket, and I heard him wedging

them under the sides of the barrel. Then he got up and entered the cottage, and presently I could see his face through the corner pane of the window, above the pink-mouthed shells. How long he remained indoors I cannot say, for before he came out again—if, indeed, he did come out—I had fallen asleep.

Hours later, when the stars were bright, I crawled out, ate the rabbit, and lapped up the water; and it is with shame that I confess having enjoyed the first meal of my captivity. My hunger appeased, my first thought was to make my escape. I struggled with the thing that held me. I did all I could to get my head through the collar, but I succeeded only in wearying myself and rubbing the skin of my neck raw. For hours I cruised up and down at the full length of my chain, though at every step the bells on my collar jingled and startled me. So the first night passed, and when day broke I slunk into my barrel. It was not far that I had to go now to reach my den after my roaming.

Soon my master came to me, examined the peg to which I was tethered and pulled the chain gently to see—at least, I supposed so—that it

was attached to the collar. I took it all very passively, for from the first I had little fear of my gaoler, who, by every act of kindness in his power, tried to reconcile me to my lot. He varied my diet by bringing me now and again a rook, or a mole, or the head of a fowl or duck. He kept the ground about the barrel clean; and as the weather got colder he changed the position of the barrel so that the sun played on the mouth of it until afternoon, when the shadow of the tamarisk fence crept across the sand before stealing up the whitewashed face of the cottage.

One day in the week he took me to the dunes with him. These sandhills were very familiar ground to me; the way he led me brought us close to my old trail, and in the deep gully near our destination we actually crossed it. Arrived at our journey's end at the top of the great dune, I lay down on the sand at the utmost extent of my tether. It seemed so strange, after the bringing up I had had, to be lying there in broad daylight with only the length of the chain separating me from my enemy, man. What would my dear mother have said, had she lived to see it? Yet, if I had not been so

dreadfully shy, I should have enjoyed this little outing.

As the days went by I got to look forward to the walk over the sandhills and, when my master came to fetch me, did not hang back in the kennel nearly so much as I had done at first. There were other signs that I was gradually losing my wildness. Incredible as it may seem, I became indifferent to the jingling of my bells. When my master called me Vulp, I answered to my name, and turned my mask towards him. Still, he never dared to stroke me, and I fear to think what might have happened had he taken this liberty. You will understand how considerate and how gentle he was when I tell you that he used to affect ignorance of my presence, and that, knowing how fearfully shy I was, he very rarely looked and never but once stared at me.

At last my confidence became so great that I used to sit watching the sea and the waving of the sand-rushes with my back turned on him. A sudden movement or a shout would have startled me horribly, but of these offences he was never guilty ; though his sneeze was terrible to hear and the stink of his tobacco intolerable.

I was all right as long as I did not remember the past. There were times, however, when the scream of a gull overhead sounded like a reproach in my ears; and the consciousness of my position was never made so bitter to me as when, with a loud swish of their wings, the starlings skimmed over the dunes towards their roosting places in the reed-beds. At the thought of the wide fen where I had roamed and hunted at will I would rebel against my bondage, and suddenly, to my master's wonderment, strain at the chain that held me. I could not help it.

Sometimes the sun had dipped below the sea before we reached the cottage, and I crept into my den at the very hour when, in the days of my freedom, I should be setting out on some expedition. And yet my instincts were becoming dulled by change of habits, and I was being weaned from the ways of the wild creature by the never-failing kindness of my master.

Once, however, I thought he had forgotten me altogether; but how I wronged him in supposing that he could be capable of such meanness to a chained dependent! He had returned home at dusk, given me my supper as usual and, after pick-

ing a few sprigs of holly, entered the cottage. To my surprise he did not come in the morning and fill up my water-tin, as he had not once failed to do hitherto. Every moment I expected to see the door open and my master appear with the red pitcher in his hand; but the hours passed, and still he did not come. At last I heard a footstep, not in the house, but coming from the direction of the farm. A minute or so later the farmer himself turned the corner and entered the cottage. He soon came out again, and I could hear his hurried heavy tread until it was lost in the murmur of the westerly wind. The sun was low and the little dormer window in the thatch afire with the last rays of day before he returned. Both he and the man who came with him entered the cottage very quietly. There they remained a long time, and as they left they spoke in whispers. When their footsteps died away I crept out and licked the tin basin for the sake of the dew which had settled on it, for I was very thirsty. At dawn I crept back to my kennel. The second and the third day passed in the same way, and at nightfall on the fourth the agony I suffered from thirst was excruciating. But on this I will not dwell. When

I had quite given myself up for lost relief came, not from the farmer or the other man, but from my dear master.

Never shall I forget the sight that met my eyes in the depth of that wintry night. My master's face was the first thing I saw as the door opened, but so altered that I scarcely recognised him, for not only was it thinner than usual, but its pallor startled me. Instead of being ruddy, his cheeks were as white as the jug he carried. He crawled slowly towards me on all fours, setting the jug down on the sand. His feet were bare like his hands, and within his open shirt I could see his bare breast. He lifted the jug with difficulty and filled the basin with water, and whilst I was lapping it he succeeded, after two or three efforts, in unfastening the chain from my collar. Then he poured the remainder of the water into the tin, and when I was drinking it he patted my neck. For the first time since my capture I wagged my brush. He muttered something and left me, dragging himself back in the same way to the door, which stood open for the rest of the night.

The water saved my life. How it refreshed me!

—how it seemed to find its way into the dried-up tissues of my half-starved frame! After a time I began to wander up and down my old rut, and then suddenly it occurred to me that my chain no longer held me, that I was free to wander wherever I liked. Whether it was because I was very weak and exhausted, or because I felt the constraint of the collar I was wearing, I do not know, but I was not greatly rejoiced to have my liberty, and after cruising up and down before the cottage until the stars paled, I returned to my barrel as usual.

The next morning the farmer on leaving the cottage came towards me.

'The varmint's broke loose at laast,' said he, bending over the end of the chain, 'and gone off with Jess's old collar'; but as he knelt on the sand and looked into the barrel: 'Well, well,' he exclaimed, 'not gone, then: tamed are 'ee, with hunger and thirst, I suppose, for I never gave 'ee a thought till now, more shame to me.'

Then for the first time he seemed to notice the jug.

'Now, how came this here? . . . Never! madness! what! risk his life for an old fox: bless my senses!'

He supplied me regularly with food and water and fresh bedding for the next fortnight, during which I never once saw or heard my master. One morning, however, the upper window was opened, and a feeble voice cried: 'Vulp, Vulp!' In a twinkling I was at the mouth of the barrel, looking up at my master's face. 'Good fox, good fox!' was all he said, and then slowly withdrew.

Two days later, when a soft wind from over the dunes feebly stirred the tamarisks, my master came slowly out of the cottage, led by a little girl. He called me as he passed, but the sun was shining so brightly that I was at first too shy to venture beyond the mouth of the barrel. His voice was very weak, but quite audible to me, and as he kept calling 'Vulp, Vulp,' I stole quickly across the sandy path and lay in the shadow of the overhanging pieces of wood on the heap, a few steps from the bench under the pear-tree where my master sat. His chin rested on the hand which held his thick walking stick, and for the first time since I had been his, he kept staring at me with his big blue eyes.

'Look at me, Vulp, look at me; not gone, good

fox, Vulp, Vulp!' at which I turned my mask towards him.

'Lead me in, child,' were the only other words he uttered; whereupon the girl slid from the seat and stood beside him, and when at last he rose she led him away towards the door. I was in my kennel long before they entered the cottage.

Far off though spring might be, that morning was big with promise of its coming, and I noticed how the kindling warmth of the sun made itself felt in the few birds I could see or hear. Early though it was, the wren that loved the woodpile and roosted under the dormer thatch busied itself gathering materials for its nest; partridges called from the rushy field beyond the dune, and the lark that soared overhead carolled its first love-song of the year.

In the genial days that followed, when my winter coat felt a burden, there awoke in me, even whilst I sat at my master's feet, a renewed longing for the old life and a yearning for the companionship of my kind. As regularly as dusk came round, a strong impulse drove me afield in quest of a mate, only to find the wild desolate of trails and silent as the stars.

'Am I the only fox left?' I asked myself, as with weary steps and a feeling of utter loneliness I made my way back to my kennel.

'If so,' came the reply, 'better life in a barrel and the companionship of man than the unshared freedom of brake and fen.'

But at last came the cry I longed to hear, the cry of a vixen. I was trotting down the path between the high tamarisks when it reached me, and the next instant I was through the fence and on the high sandhill trying to locate it. My ears seemed to fool me that night, for wherever I went the exciting cry evaded me; when I ran in one direction it came from another. In the end however I caught a glimpse of the vixen two sandhills away, and the sight of her sent me flying towards her over the moonlit slopes as fast as my pads could carry me. To my chagrin, when I reached the deep gully where I thought we must meet, she was nowhere to be seen. Disappointed and enraged I was in despair. I felt sure the vixen had seen me, and should have thought the evasion natural had I been a mangy fox; but I had inherited the good looks of my dear mother, and my vanity was wounded. How many miles I followed

on her line I cannot tell, but at last I lay down panting and exhausted, and wondering at this unnatural conduct. Then, hearing the bells on my collar jingle in the silence, I realized for the first time that it was no more nor less than their accursed tinkling that had scared her. I will not dwell on the unavailing wanderings of that long weary night. I will merely add that dawn found me on the crest of the hill, on the way not to the barrel but to the earth.

An extraordinary change had come over me. In those few hours my nature had rid itself of the influence of servitude, and I was in spirit a wild fox again. After drinking at the spring—how different it was from the water of my tin—I followed my old track, now almost past recognition, and so came to the mouth of the sett. The heap was much as the murderous ruffians had left it, but a well-trampled path crossed it, and along this I entered the earth on the fresh trail of the badger.

After making my way through the winding passages I came in sight of his bed, and could see him peeping over the edge, apparently prepared to welcome me as of old. Nevertheless, as I did not feel quite sure that he recognised me, and had a

vivid recollection of his strong jaws, I gave him ample time to look at me before I approached. I purposely, though with difficulty, held my tongue for fear the change in my voice might shake his faith in my identity, and all might have gone well had I not shaken my head. At the jingling of the bells he came at me with a rush, and if I had not beaten a sudden retreat I must have fared badly.

I have been blamed for not standing my ground and explaining who I was instead of showing my brush—a sign of ignominy in the wild; but I contend that it would have been running a great risk to parley with an enraged and terrified badger, because I might have been killed, or at least maimed for life, before I succeeded in making myself known. So though a few cur-foxes, who envy us natives, have jeered at me behind my back for showing the white feather, I have always found solace in my dear mother's wise saying that the greatest of all vulpine virtues is discretion.

The badger pursued me to the mouth of his tunnel, but did not follow me into the part of the sett which I had shared with my sister before my capture. During my absence she had apparently not occupied the den, which struck me when I

looked round as being much less comfortable than the snug depths of the barrel. Nevertheless, I curled up in my old corner beside some dry bones that littered the floor, and tried, but in vain, to compose myself to sleep.

The fact is, I did not feel at all happy, and when I recall what I had gone through, I do not wonder at it; besides, to say nothing of my exhausted and bedraggled condition, what an outlaw my bells made of me! It was strange I could ever have grown deaf to their tinkling, which sounded so loudly now in the deathlike stillness of the den! What was the use of liberty whilst I bore this loud-tongued badge of bondage? At the best my life would be one of semi-starvation and, what was ten times worse for a sociable young fox like me, of isolation from my kind. Such were the thoughts that crowded my brain, till all became confused, and fatigue had its way.

Hours later I was awakened by the sound of my master's voice. I was sure it was his, though it sounded hollow as it came along the tunnel. But how did he find out where I was, and what did he want with me? I was on my feet and moving slowly towards the mouth of the earth before he

had repeated my name many times; but when I reached the last corner I could not show my mask round it, not because I feared him, but for the shame I felt at being a deserter.

'Come along, Vulp; I can hear your bells—come along;' and at last, as shamefaced as a fox can look, I advanced to where he was kneeling. 'Poor fox!' he went on, in his gentle voice, 'why thee art looking all draggled and miserable-like! Been pining for freedom, have 'ee? Well, 'tis natural; but it's no use being free with they bells about your beautiful neck, so I've come to take them away.' Then he knelt on the ground and removed the collar. 'I shall miss 'ee if thee do not stay, but thee art free to choose. Maybe thee'll pick up a mate among the furrin foxes on the way down, and then I shaant ever see thee again. The cottage will seem lonely, for I've nobody save thee for company; but remember the bar'l will stay where it is, and there'll always be sweet water in the tin in case thee do come back.'

He rose to go, but I did not move until he had passed out of sight and the sound of his footsteps died away; then I went back to my lair because I could not help it. I had heard the call, the most alluring call of the wild, and found it irresistible.

CHAPTER V

THE CARES OF A FAMILY

In my eagerness to find the vixen I left the sett before it was dusk. I searched the brake without coming on any trace of her, and to my repeated calls from the crest of the hill there was no response. Then I traversed the fen from end to end, calling as I went, and penetrated to the cliffs beyond the headland. There dawn surprised me, and at daybreak I sought the old earth at the foot of the precipice. The den, with its litter of bones, was as we had left it, but it seemed very small in comparison with the spacious quarters of the sett.

I got little sleep for thought of the vixen, and whilst the west was yet golden I left my lodging and set out for the country beyond the salmon river. Again I was destined to be disappointed, despite the long round I took before reaching the

tor. I intended lying up there, but, finding the wind chilly on the heights, I made my way down the rocky steep to the wood below, where I curled up on a soft bed of pine needles. A great quiet reigned around me, the wind in the lofty treetops sung my lullaby, and soon I dropped off.

I slept the whole day through, and twilight had deepened the gloom under the pines before I rose to search the stretch of wild moors that run up to the northern cliffs. I made for the very heart of them, and may have covered a league, when from the summit of a cairn where I stood listening, I saw a fox moving along the heathery hollow below me. At the first glimpse in the uncertain light I thought it was the vixen, but the instant he left the ling I discovered my mistake. After my long isolation I was eager to exchange greetings with one of my kind, and made towards him, selecting the open ground of the rugged slope, so that he might the more readily espy me. He saw me the moment I left the rocks, and instead of making off, as I feared he might, he trotted towards me without a sign of hesitancy.

On meeting we smelt one another over as our manner is when amicably disposed; and, friendly

relations being thus established, I asked him whether he came from the Blue Hill country, which with the district I roamed over made up, I thought, the whole world. Before answering, he squatted on his haunches, the usual posture for palaver; and, though I was very anxious to get on, I squatted on mine, lest he should think me churlish. Then he said:

'I come from the Black Forest, where I had my earth near the foot of a ravine, far from the haunts of man. Once only had I crossed his trail, and, though I often heard the sound of his axe, it came from so far away that it sounded like the tapping of a woodpecker. Thus I had little occasion to fear him, and none at all to fear the boar, the stag, the otter, the pine-marten, or even the wolf, who shared our solitude during one hard winter. I was as happy as a fox could be, whether in the forests or on the peak above the timber, where I kennelled and hunted after the melting of the snow; and, in my innocence, I thought my happiness would last all my life. Alas! it was not so. Some three weeks ago I was in my earth, when I was awoke out of my sleep by the tread of heavy feet above my head, and presently heard the noise of footsteps

in the passage leading to my lair. Nearer and nearer they approached, and, at last, the head of a dachshund appeared. He and I fought, whilst the men sank a shaft on me. What chance of escape had I? Soon I was gripped behind the ears and dropped into a sack, and that night I was placed, with four other foxes, in a small hovel at the foot of the mountains.'

As he said this, I thought I heard the call of the vixen, and jumped to my feet.

'One moment; let me give you my word of warning before you go. One of the four was a powerful, cruel brute, more like a wolf than a fox. Beware of him; he is a savage monster, and he is somewhere on the moors.'

'On these moors?'

'Yes, I passed him heading that way not long before I met you.'

The disturbing news was scarcely imparted when I again heard the wail-like call. There was no mistaking it this time. It was the cry of the vixen. Nothing could hold me now; so abruptly bidding my friend 'good hunting,' I hurried off faster than my pads had ever carried me. On the crest of the jagged ridge where I stood and listened, to my

chagrin, I heard the call, not of the vixen, but of a dog-fox on the loftier ridge in front. Maddened by the voice of a rival, I challenged him with yaps as defiant as my throat and temper could produce; and, when the echoes died away, the cry of the vixen came again from the gloomy depths of the valley below us.

At the sound I galloped down the long slope; and as I sighted the skittish little creature, I saw too my formidable opponent coming furiously towards me. I am not ashamed to own that my courage momentarily quailed. He was a bigger fox than I had seen, even in my dreams; but jealousy whispered 'worst him, or the vixen will be his.' At this awakening of my fighting instincts I felt a strength in my jaws and limbs which they had never known before, and took up my position without a moment's pause.

Muzzle to muzzle we stood, my rival and I, with teeth bared for the fray. No exchange of licks was there, no dallying by way of prelude to the battle. It matters not who got the first snap; 'give and take' was the word, and soon our cheeks were scored with gashes, mine the deepest. The strength of the brute's jaws was

terrible. I knew it by the way his teeth cut to the bone, by their clash and ring when they failed to get home. We were most unequally matched. Besides his greater strength, his enormous height gave him an advantage whether we fought on all fours or, as we mostly did, on our hind feet. Hence he had the best of the exchanges, and when the fight had lasted what seemed half the night I began to give way. Seeing this, my foe tried to bear me down by his great weight, and if I had not been nimble enough to evade his repeated onsets he must have succeeded. Then it would have been all over with me; so again I altered my tactics.

In my extremity I resolved on a most desperate course. With a wild rush born of despair I forced his muzzle aside, and though I missed his shoulder, for which I was aiming, I was able to fix my holders deep in his throat with a grip like that of a strong trap that clenches its teeth through what it closes on. The strength of his jaws was now of no avail, and he struggled furiously to shake me off, flinging me against the sharp-edged rocks till I could scarcely hold on for the pain I suffered. Only too gladly would I have let him go if I had been sure he would have shown a clean pair

"HE STRUGGLED FURIOUSLY TO SHAKE ME OFF."

of heels, but the uncertainty grappled me to him until he should give in. It seemed as if he never would, but gradually his struggles grew fainter, and towards the end he ceased to quiver, even when I bit at the sinews which just prevented my teeth from meeting.

At last I felt him go all limp, and soon he lay helpless, black with sweat and stained with blood, on the edge of a pool. No creature could have presented a more broken, bedraggled appearance; in fact, he looked the beaten fox he was. His great ears lay flat on his broad poll, the muscles of his chest twitched as his sides rose and fell with his quick, distressed breathing, and in the huge brush that clung tightly to his hindquarters lying in the water, I saw the sign of unconditional surrender. Then from his upturned eye came an appeal for life.

Now mercy is a quality unknown in the wild, but I had not strength enough to kill him or even to punish him further. As I did not fall upon him he presently struggled to his feet and looked about him in a dazed way, seeking a line of retreat in the rock-strewn waste; his dull gaze sought my eyes once more, and seeing there no hostile intent,

he wound his way amongst the boulders as painfully as I once saw a dying fox crawl along his last trail to the cave of death. Scarcely had he covered a score yards when he sank to the ground. I thought he would never rise again, but in this I was mistaken, for presently he got up, and after turning his terror-struck eyes on me, dragged his great frame step by step up the long slope, where I lost sight of him in the mirk through which only the hoary rocks loomed faintly.

No one can tell the relief it was to me when the darkness swallowed him up. I could not have held out another minute ; my collapse was complete, and I lay as one half-dead. Let no one wonder at my utter exhaustion, let him rather marvel at my endurance : I was not yet a full-grown fox, and I had had no food since starting on my quest. So there I lay on the edge of the pool, perfectly conscious, but so prostrate as to be almost indifferent to my fate. A violent thirst consumed me, yet it was beyond my power to reach the water.

However, I was better off than my beaten rival, for the thought of victory burned in my brain, and with it the consciousness that victory had won me not

only safety but love and companionship. The vixen came and licked my wounds, and though she left me at daybreak she did not wander away, but sought a kennel in the ling hard by where I could just see her. Such was the great fight which won me the devoted mate who, as long as she lived, shared my pleasures and my hardships.

The week that followed my recovery was the most romantic period of my chequered life, and it added not a little to my happiness to resume cordial relations with my old friend the badger, who was delighted when the vixen decided to make the sett her home. She very soon accommodated herself to her new surroundings, and before a month had passed had acquired complete knowledge of the country over which we hunted together every night. The great variety of the hunting-grounds, the fen, the dunes, and the tor wood took her fancy; as indeed was natural after the bleak waste of moors about her old home.

At first we foraged wherever she liked, but one night, some five or six weeks after mating, I wished to hunt in the tor wood whilst she insisted on working the fen. We had a tiff, and in the end she went one way and I the other. As bad luck

would have it, neither of us killed. The incident did not end there, for, instead of curling up side by side as was our wont, we lay like strangers in opposite corners of the den, and as mute as we were sullen. Not a wink of sleep could I get for thinking of the painful situation, and how to end it. I felt that one of us must give in, so after a struggle with my own pride I crept over to her and with faltering tongue owned that I had been a selfish brute. Then, instead of reviling me as I greatly feared, she licked my face and made up the quarrel.

The memory of this incident dwelt with me, and not for the fattest and juiciest pheasant that ever roosted in that wood would I again cross her. The angry look that awaited me on my return to the earth and haunts me still, would alone prevent me. A sorry ending to the honeymoon, does someone say? So it was; simply because life was too smooth, and without anything to distract attention from ourselves. A bit of worry, even in the heyday of love, is as medicinal in its way as a bit of squitch in the spring, and a common care later on is absolutely necessary for the health of the affections.

The recollections of that unfortunate night may

have rankled for some time, but when our family arrived the last traces of our difference disappeared. And such a family! There were five of them, and the little creatures almost made us forget our own existence, so wholly did they absorb our every thought. For myself, I was either planning foraging expeditions or carrying them out, and the vixen was busy night and day attending to the helpless black mites, that spent a good deal of their time sprawling over the floor of the den which she had scratched sweet and clean for them. How proud she was of them, and how jealous! I might only peep at my precious offspring from the mouth of the lair when I returned with food for their mother. Yet, whether it was the helplessness of those blind cubs or my love for the vixen, or both, that stirred me, I cannot say; but, whatever the cause, I had never ransacked fen and covert in search of tit-bits so diligently before.

I say 'ransacked' because of the serious scarcity of fur and feather over the whole district, and especially close home. The dread of famine that has haunted me all my life dates from the time when, in spite of my best efforts, I could not keep the vixen supplied with food enough to make good the drain

on her strength caused by suckling her vigorous litter. I do not remember that rabbits and hares were ever scarcer than they were that summer, and smaller game was far from plentiful.

The vixen herself foraged a good deal. Even before the cubs could see she used to work the brake about the earth and the part of the fen adjacent to the foothills, whence she could return home several times in the course of the night to assure herself of the safety of her precious charge. Yet, clever and indefatigable hunter though she was, she rarely secured anything bigger than a mouse, a vole, or a moorhen: frequently she did not kill at all.

It happened on one of these blank nights that I too was unsuccessful. It was a most unfortunate coincidence, for without food there was no nourishment for the cubs, who harried their mother with their persistent complainings. On reaching the earth at dawn I could hear them crying out, and when I came to the mouth of the den the little beggars looked up at me, as I thought, reproachfully. But what pained me more was the distress of the vixen on seeing I had returned empty-mouthed. Seizing the opportunity I tried, as indeed I had tried twice

before, to get her to move the cubs to a place where prey was more plentiful.

'Where?' she asked.

'To your old home by the North Cliffs,' was my reply.

She made many objections. The brake was too far from water; the bleak down between it and the nearest pool was covered with such stunted heather that she could not cross it unobserved by day, and so on; but the insuperable difficulty was the fact that she could not possibly remove five cubs so far in the course of a single night.

I stayed with her until the bright rays came peeping in at the mouth of the sett, and then stole away to my lair on the hillside, where I had lain out since the cubs were born. The sun was high in the sky before I dozed off, and I should not have slept at all had I had the least inkling that the vixen was about to take the desperate step she did. She left the earth at midday, and raided the very farmyard where she knew I had been made prisoner. When at dusk I saw at the mouth of the earth the remains of the old gobbler she had killed, I was very angry and remonstrated with her on the

danger to which it exposed not only herself but the cubs.

'I knew the peril,' she replied with much spirit, 'and I would dare anything rather than let my little treasures die of hunger.'

'But what would happen to the litter if you were killed?'

'You would look after them, would you not, foxey? Their teeth are coming, and you would procure and break up their food for them, and keep them clean, and take them out and train them to hunt?'

'Yes,' I replied, after a pause, for her words made me feel very miserable, 'but that would not bring you back to life and to me; and a fine bringing-up the cubs would have if left on my hands.'

She did not reply to this, and as I was anxious to end the scene, and eager to be off in search of food, I licked her sad face, and trotting down the hill, was soon making my way across the marsh-land, where every runnel and pool and the loops of the river looked like silver in the moonlight. But my cares went with me, and all night long I was troubled by the thought of the farmer's vengeance.

This fell on us no later than the following day.

A ring of traps was set at the mouth of the earth, and inside it was laid a couple of young rabbits—a most tempting bait for a half-starved vixen. Hearing my steps as I approached the earth that night, she warned me by her 'kek, kek,' to beware of danger, and I shudder to think what might have happened if she had not; for if a worse fate can befall one than to be caught in a trap and killed, it is to be left to die there, or to drag out a miserable existence, as too many of us do, with a gin clinging to one of our legs. I gave the murderous circle of ambushed teeth as wide a berth as I could, and on coming within sight of the entrance, found the vixen standing guard over the cubs, who were all eagerness to come out and play as usual. How she managed to keep the five restless little innocents out of danger I do not know; yet she did, and not that night only, but during the whole dreadful week that the traps remained. And the vile engines worked one good result, inasmuch as they proved more effective than a dozen scoldings in keeping the vixen away from the farmyard, whither she never ventured again.

The difficulty of obtaining food steadily increased, however, till at last it was plain that we were to

face a famine. The situation was aggravated, too, by the large number of foxes to the east of the fen, who not only depleted the scanty stores, but, by continual raids, rendered the prey we hunted exceedingly wild and wary. Within three miles of our earth no less than seven litters were being reared, and all were suffering as much as ourselves.

Of the foxes I met in my journeyings not one was in good condition; and the sight of their gaunt frames not only served to remind me of my own staring ribs, but filled me with dread of a loathsome disease called mange, to which ill-fed foxes are very liable. My mother had told me and my sisters all about it, and warned us never to go near any fox that had a bare place in his coat; and so great was my dread of the contagion that I would never have ventured into the outlying parts of our hunting-grounds infested by the foreign foxes, but that our home beats were almost devoid of game.

Numerous as the furred and feathered creatures near the sett had once been, I now knew all the survivors. There was a little jack hare so crafty that he could give points to a fox; a few duck that kept to the middle of the mere; a wide-awake

cock-pheasant that was all eyes and ears; and two coveys of partridges there was no getting near. Besides these there were a few rabbits; but they had no rest day or night from the plague of stoats and weasels that had also thinned the number of the moles, and with the hawks and owls wrought great havoc amongst mice, voles, and shrews.

Never, perhaps, was any district so scoured by ravenous foragers as was our promontory; almost nightly I had proof of it. I invariably found a rival quartering whatever ground I purposed drawing; unless I was ensconced by sundown, another fox was almost always in possession of any ambush I hoped to use. Even if I had contrived to secure a post I frequently lost any fruit of the vigil through the arrival at the critical moment of the fox I had forestalled, or some other blundering forager. I remember a brute of a polecat who carried a wriggling eel, spoiling one of the best stalks I ever made. I should have attacked him but for his noisome stench, which neither water nor rolling will remove when once it gets on your fur. Trails of the weasel tribe were numerous enough, but the runs of game in undergrowth and reed-bed were almost obliterated; the rabbit creeps in the furze

were cobwebbed over or grown together, and the hare paths that had criss-crossed the uplands blotted out by untrodden bents.

Two trails there were which were much used after a heavy fall of rain: one led from the bulrushes in the heart of the quaking bog, the other from the head of the mere, and both were laid by the otters that trafficked to and fro between the fen and the salmon river in the gorge beyond the tor. As far as I know, these restless, unsociable wanderers did not suffer at all except from the dearth of wildfowl; but my only reason for saying so is the number of salmon left almost untouched on the banks—which, by the way, saved many a fox from starvation. It was indeed a time of terrible stress, yet marked in my case by two feasts of so extraordinary a character that the story of my life would be incomplete without mention of them.

One night, as I was on my way to the cairn on the far side of the fen to try and catch at least one of the two wily buck-rabbits which I believed yet remained there, I saw a white owl stoop and then fly towards the tor with something in her claws. At a time of plenty I should have taken no notice whatever of so ordinary an incident, but now it

made me quicken my steps towards the part of the marsh whence she had risen. Whilst I was yet hurrying there another owl glided past me, carrying a half-grown rat. At this I broke into a gallop. My astonishment may be imagined when, after swimming a pool beyond some rushes and issuing from the reeds that lined its further bank, I saw on the exposed level ground before me a swarm of rats. Never had I seen the like, and though I have been abroad on all but the dirtiest nights for over six years since then, I have never seen the like again.

Despite my famished condition the amazing sight checked my steps and made me look on in wonderment. So close-packed was the horde that it hid the ground as it marched, and seemed just a big moving patch rippling with life. The rat that led was heading for the nearest point of the great reed-bed which stretched seaward nearly as far as the mere. He was a huge fellow, and took no notice of the owls that glided past or of a stoat that darted across in front. His cool determination to make his point did not escape me, but it struck me less than the way the great throng behind preserved its regular formation despite

the starving beasts of prey that harassed its flanks.

Here was food galore — slow-footed creatures right in the open between two great reed-brakes. I got just inside the fringe of them, and stood there dealing death with every snap of my jaws, whilst the survivors rippled past me as a stream ripples past a rock.

How long the work of destruction went on I cannot say, but when at last the horde had passed I had had enough, and stood awhile to watch the rear ranks disappear in the cover. The great reed-bed rustled as if disturbed by a strong wind, but not a squeak broke from the disciplined lines of the nomads. I was startled to see the havoc I had wrought, for a semicircular heap of dead lay round the spot where I had stood. If the vixen and cubs had only come up at the moment, what a banquet I could have provided them with! But as there was little hope of that, I picked up as much of the spoil as I could carry, and, leaving the rest to be pillaged by the depredators I could see coming up on the broad trail, I hastened at full speed to the earth. The vixen and cubs were away when I reached it, so I dropped my precious burden on the heap

and galloped back as fast as my legs would carry me. Owls and stoats were helping themselves to my kill; whilst an impudent polecat actually disputed my right to what was left until I showed my teeth. Then he made off, and allowed me to get at my own. Realizing that not a single morsel would be left after a second journey, I fell to and made the best meal I had had for months. Even then there remained more than I could possibly carry away, and to this a miserably thin stoat that came up at the moment with her six little whelps was welcome.

On my way back rain fell in torrents and drenched me, but I cared little for the wetting when I considered that I had provided a plentiful meal for my family.

The following nights the vixen and cubs hunted the fen, and had great sport with the rats which had taken up their temporary abode in the honeycombed banks of the mere and on the islands that studded it. A week later all that remained of the horde had disappeared, and the voles were left in undisputed possession of the runs and holes from which they had been temporarily evicted.

Thus we were again brought face to face with

the scarcity that preceded the coming of the rats; and I and other dog-foxes, who during the time of plenty had foraged only for ourselves, resumed our old parts of helping to provide for the cubs. A finer set of young foxes than mine I never set eyes on, and it grieved me to observe how thin they were. To see them in the train of their proud little mother, when she led them out to hunt, was enough to excite admiration even in a stranger. Following her came the three vixens, and capering at their heels their two big playful brothers. As soon as they hit a trail they became all stealth, and melted so noiselessly away that I could not detect their whereabouts till the silence was broken by the chattering made over the kill.

With the approach of autumn a swarm of young foxes began to fend for themselves; and, partly to escape them, partly because the ordinary supply of food had quite failed, I used to seek the most unfrequented places, and amongst them the shore, especially that part of it between the headland and a little rill far along the sandhills, where I generally quenched my thirst. At times I penetrated to the extreme limit of the dunes, though I seldom found

anything but a few sand-eels that the tide had thrown up. It was an inhospitable place—a wind-swept, wave-beaten spot, and I ceased visiting it on being frightened by a legless monster that I saw shuffle along a spit of sand into the surf.

Not a week elapsed after I fortunately gave up this remote beat, before I happened on a windfall at a time when food was sorely needed. The place of plenty was the shore below the mere, and again I was attracted by birds; this time by gulls, whose screams—an unusual inshore noise at midnight—I could hear long before I could see the birds themselves. On gaining the pebbly bar whence the beach came into view, I was struck by the glow-worm like appearance of the edge of the tide, and the silvery streaks on the wet sands. When near enough I found that the streaks were lines of fish, stranded but still alive, and that hundreds more were floundering in the shallow water, to which they imparted the luminosity I had noticed. Being ravenously hungry, I ate a few of the fish and then collected a small heap to carry to the earth. But do what I could, I was unable to hold more than four at a time, for when I opened my mouth to pick up a fifth, two at least

would slip between my teeth ; so after wasting precious minutes in the vain attempt, I had to be content with the smaller number.

Fortunately I came on the vixen and cubs near the upper end of the mere as they were leaving the great reed-bed in which they had been hunting. I thought the vixen looked at me reproachfully when I dropped the fish at her feet, as if saying, 'Why did you not bring twice as many whilst you were about it ?'

'It was the best I could do,' I said. 'It wasn't for want of trying. However, let us not waste time here. Follow me, and I will lead you to a great feast.'

When the cubs had eaten the fish I piloted them, with the vixen in their midst, across a wide stream to the spot on the edge of the tide, still noisy with the clamour of the gulls. There we ate our fill of the delicious food, which the cubs seemed to enjoy as much as if they were young otters. What a meal we had, and what fun the cubs made, playing with the fish that floundered in the shallow water ! Loth to interrupt their sport the vixen stayed until the first streak of day lighted the sky beyond the headland before she uttered the 'dawn' cry

and drew her cubs about her. At a hurried pace she led them across the overflow of the mere, and leaving the shore, reached the furze brake, under shelter of which they gained the earth without mishap.

I did not follow them in, but sought the outlying lair on the hill, to the loneliness of which I had now grown accustomed. Indeed, I had preferred it of late despite a plague of flies, for on the few occasions I was allowed to curl up in the earth, the young rascals disturbed my sleep by their restlessness, and annoyed me by tugging at my brush, to the tag of which they took quite a fancy.

The hillside lair was amongst furze, which encircled it as the reeds encircled my favourite pool. It was a snug spot in a westerly wind, and very warm when the sun shone. There, in a shallow pit, I used to lie on a cushion of heather, and doze the day through until the fen became gray with the first shades of night. When wearied by the cubs the vixen would often join me there; and we spent many happy hours in that peaceful spot, the silence broken only by her soft purring. Then as soon as she was rested she would leave her purple couch, and steal back to her charge.

I have also known her venture across the open to join me in the bed of rushes that grew in the midst of the quaking bog. That secluded spot was my favourite summer lair. Furze I choose in storm, rain, or snow, for I like to lie above ground as much as any stub-bred fox, but I prefer reeds and osiers on a still, hot day, when the dragon-fly is on the pool and the air hums with the wings of insects revelling in the fierce sun. Unlike the vixen I feared to cross the expanse of bare bog outside after the sun was up; for, on the rare occasions when I did so, the hateful magpies saw me, even though I made a dash from the tongue of land projecting into the marsh. Therefore to escape the eyes of these pests I used to steal over the exposed surface in the gray dawn, and had drunk and settled down for the day before the east brightened. Yet, however early I might be ensconced, I was never in my kennel before the otters who so often shared this safe retreat with me. As a rule only one was laid up there at a time, though I have twice seen a bitch with cubs, and once a dog and a bitch; the dog, the finest otter I ever saw, but much scarred about the face.

I am a suspicious creature in regard to man

and his belongings, yet I should call myself reckless and confiding in comparison with the otters I saw there. Any sound the least unusual, such as the neigh of a horse or, as once, the bray of an ass that had the run of our brake, would cause them the greatest consternation, though, as far as I know, neither man or aught of his had ever crossed the morass that guarded us.

So thin was the crust of the quaking bog that I doubt whether my old friend, the badger, could have covered twice his length without sinking out of sight; and at first it surprised me that the heaviest of the otters had succeeded, though I learnt later that their webbed feet made the crossing possible for those who did not reach the rushes by way of the stream.

In the absence of alarm these secretive creatures generally lay so close that I should not have been aware of their presence save for the taint in the air which reached me when the breeze blew my way. I remember the vixen coming to me there one day, and, softly as she trod the undergrowth, the dry stems of the rushes rattled slightly when she glided through them. To my astonishment an otter's mask showed instantly at a small opening in the

sedge, disappearing as suddenly when he saw who the intruder was. Till then, good as were my eyes, ears and nose, I had no idea that an otter was at home.

Not that the knowledge of his whereabouts would have induced me to encroach on what these unsociable amphibians regarded as their private domain. I might, if thirsty, advance to the edge of the pool, but no further; and never once did I dream of crossing to the sedgy islet where these creatures invariably laid up, for I was content to curl up alone at the foot of the velvet-headed bulrushes, which in the still hot weather stood as motionless as forest trees.

Towards the end of August some heavy rains made the fen uninhabitable, and on the setting in of the easterly wind which succeeded them I resorted to a small brake of dwarf furze over the crest of the hill. Thence I could see, far below, the farm-buildings nestling amongst the trees, and the cottage on the edge of the dunes that stretched such a long, long way towards the sunset and were lost in the haze which frequently hung over the sea. The spot had one serious drawback. As I lay there I heard the cocks crowing and saw the geese fleck-

ing the stubble by the rickyard; and, unable to bear the tantalizing sound and sight, I had to jump to my feet, make a round of the bushes, and drink at the spring near the wind-clipt pines to prevent myself from going down the hill after them. It was a great temptation to me, and even a greater temptation to the vixen, who sometimes paid me a visit about sundown, especially if anything was troubling her.

I remember her coming on a sad business in the autumn, when the elms were yellowing, and half the stubble on which their shadow fell, had been upturned by the plough. I knew what she had come about; for only the previous day a hunted cub had sought refuge in our earth, and had scarcely reached the den before the hounds were baying at the mouth of the sett. The consternation of vixen and cubs at this awful clamour may be imagined. Luckily no terrier was at hand to follow the bedraggled fugitive, and so all escaped molestation.

On hearing the vixen's step, I did my best to throw off all trace of concern, but without success, for the first words she said were:

'Don't worry, foxey; let us make arrangements to baffle the pack. It isn't for myself that I care,

it's those precious cubs I'm thinking of. Is there any place you know of where they will be safe from the hounds?'

Now, if the quaking bog had not been under water at the time, I should have suggested the rushes in the midst of it; but as it was, I replied:

'We are safest where we are; we know every inch of the country, and so do the cubs. Moreover, you have taught them enough to puzzle the stupid hounds, now haven't you?'

She grinned at this, showing her snow-white teeth; and, to tell the truth, I was astonished to see how calmly she regarded the possibilities of the future. It may be I did not fathom her feelings; for, when the earth was stopped a week later, she was in a fever of anxiety, as I could tell by the frantic way she tried and tried again and again to remove the faggots which prevented the cubs from getting to ground.

'Why waste time at this hopeless task?' said I at last. 'Let us seek refuge amongst the dunes before the sun compels us to lie up in the brake, where the hounds will be sure to come on us.'

'Then you have changed your mind,' she retorted,

with the furze-spines sticking to her lips. 'You said we are safest where we are.'

I was silent. What could I reply?

We kennelled in the brake, where the pack found us and hustled us for hours; but owing partly to the bad scent, partly to the closeness of the furze, through which hounds had to force a way where a fox might run, the cubs escaped.

Unbounded was the vixen's joy when, at night-fall, all responded to her call, and came galloping up over the splashy ground to where she stood by the reeds near my favourite pool. Big as they were, each in turn had to submit to being fondled, though the closer ties that bind vixen and cubs had been relaxed since the youngsters had begun to forage for themselves. Nevertheless, the mother's affection survived her control over them, and more than a month after this I heard her, from my lair on the hill-side, calling some belated cub to the earth, and calling in vain, for she did not leave off till it was nearly light.

I remember it well, because on the night following that very dawn the earth was again stopped, and again I found the vixen in a state of great trepidation.

'Come,' I said, somewhat angrily, 'do not waste another moment; we shall not escape this time if we have to lie up in the brake.'

She looked at me as much as to say, 'Why not?'

'Because,' I replied, 'the runs are not so small as when the hounds first drew it, and one, at least, of the cubs will be killed to a certainty.'

This was a good reason; and I have never been able to understand how, after our first experience, she could delay, instead of retreating to the fen or to the sand-hills whilst the light was yet gray enough to hide our movements. In the end, when it was too late, my advice prevailed. I say too late, for the sun was above the land and bathing the world with its rays, when we seven set out for the dunes, the vixen leading. Over the crest of the hill we stole to the waste land that runs down to the fields. Fortunately for us, nothing stirred about the farm; but in the lower corner of the croft two heifers, who saw us coming, rose from their couches in the yellow fern and, as they stretched themselves, stood glowering at the unusual spectacle. We escaped other observation, unless the seagulls saw us; but, if so, they did not

scold and jeer at us, as jays and magpies would have done, and, leaving the silent cottage on our right, we crept through the thick tamarisk hedge to a sandy hollow that wound in and out amongst the dunes. Along gully after gully we crept to avoid being seen; but now and then we had to top the ridges, where no concealment was possible, and there our strange shadows blackened the bright sand or scanty herbage and made me long to be curled up in any kennel, no matter where. Truly, it was a terrible journey; but at length we reached the remote spot for which the vixen was making, far beyond the high sandhill my master used to lead me to. It was a dune similar in appearance to the others, being more or less covered with a gray-green rush; but a rill, fed by the only springs in all that extensive waste of sand, trickled along its base, and this, no doubt, had induced the thoughtful little mother to fix on the slope beyond it for her litter.

After quenching their thirst, vixen and cubs dispersed on the slope, and succeeded in concealing themselves so effectually that I could see nothing of them from the crest of the dune over against it, where I chose my kennel. There on the sand,

at a spot a little wide of the track by which we had come, I curled up and tried to sleep, but could not; for, despite the security this remote spot seemed to afford, I feared that the hounds might follow up our trail and come upon us in that open wilderness. What a painful thought! seven foxes flying in all directions, with never a bush to hide them or an earth to receive them!

Meanwhile a partridge flew past at terrific speed, with a peregrine in pursuit; and, later, a great bee went droning by, seemingly as homeless as the wind that moaned over the dunes. About noon I descried the ears of the vixen close to a patch of sea-holly that grew amidst the rushes, showing that she, too, was on the alert; and soon after, one of the cubs stole down to the pool above a tiny fall, lapped hurriedly and, after listening and trying the wind, retired as furtively as a full-grown fox—not to his old place, but over the crest of the dune in search of more sheltered quarters. It was evident that the careful schooling of the vixen had not been wasted, and that he knew how to take care of himself. Feeling the air chilly when the sky became overcast, I got up, scratched some sand out to make my lair deeper, lay down

again well out of reach of the cold wind, and at last fell asleep.

When I awoke some hours later it was with a start, for I had either heard or dreamt I heard the cry of hounds. It was no imaginary alarm my sentinel sense had given me. The cry was faint: at times it almost died away; but there was no mistaking it; and as I listened it grew more and more distinct. The hounds were coming my way. They could not be giving tongue on our cold line. Then had the hunted fox passed whilst I slept, or was he between me and his pursuers?

Whilst I stood listening with my head over the edge of the pit, I saw a very big fox—in fact, my old rival—cross the high ridge two dunes away, and, to my horror, in a direction that must bring him straight to me. Of this I felt so little doubt that I was prepared to take up the running, should he push me out of my kennel. It was an agonizing wait whilst he was out of sight; but he must have swerved a little in the hidden ground, for when he crossed my ridge he was fully ten yards wide of me.

He was moving with the free, easy stride that bespeaks good running condition. He had not a

particle of fat about him; and I suspect that he had suffered, though probably less than the rest of us, from the famine. I could see it in his slightly pinched flank, and in the ribs just distinguishable through his splendid coat. Black mud reached a good way up his muscular hind quarter, but the brush—which he held straight out—was magnificent, and ended in the longest snow-white tag I have ever seen.

He stopped a moment at the spring to lap the bubbling water, and then, with forefoot raised, turned his head to listen. I thought he must see my muzzle projecting through the rushes; but all his senses were in his pricked ears, and he did not notice me. The next instant he trotted up the steep bank as lightly as a sandpiper, and passed out of sight. I knew from the whiffs which the crisp wind brought me that he was leaving a good scent, and I was not surprised to see the hounds coming on as they did, their heads up and with diminished cry.

Now, what was I to do—crouch there, or steal away? If I stayed it was possible the pack might not light on me; whereas if I slunk away, I could not hope to escape their eyes. So I decided to remain where I was.

The thud of heavy feet beat on my brain, and I quivered at the whimper, which terrifies more than the full cry. Then over the crest they flung at their utmost speed, while the westering sun caught the wet mire on their chests and crimsoned their lolling tongues. I held my breath when they swept by within a few feet of me, watched them scramble up the high bank, waited until a yapping white terrier with a bloodstain on his cheek had gone by, and then, trembling in every limb, stole down to the vixen and tried to comfort her.

'The danger is past: it's the big fox they are running.'

She was listening as I said this, but not to me; and I could see she was fearful that the hounds might return.

'Not the least question of that,' I said; 'the fox, big as he is, will never face this wind. We are quite safe.'

I was right, for we heard nothing more of the hunt; unless one or two sounds that reached our ears after sundown really were, as we suspected, the notes of the horn. Whatever they were they came from the north-east, and were very faint: we should not have heard them at all if the high wind had not been in that quarter.

It was a cold, nipping wind, too ; and I had occasion to remember it, for it lasted with little change of direction month after month, being, I believe, the cause of the terrible frost that so long held our country in its grip.

CHAPTER VI

THE GREAT WINTER

Though few of the changes in the autumn life of the wild escaped me, I was slow to interpret those signs that foretold the severe weather that was so suddenly to set in. It is, however, hardly matter for wonder that I was blind to the warnings they conveyed, for the frosts of our peninsula are, as a rule, so slight as to relax their feeble grip by noonday; even the smallest birds suffer little discomfort. Indeed, I have sometimes thought that migratory birds flock to our shores because of the mildness of the climate and the hospitality its feeding grounds offer; but this is only the view of a fox, who welcomes these aliens, and takes heavy toll of their number. Whatever the cause may be, there is no doubt about the fact. This year, however, the flocks of fieldfares, always the first to arrive, were

earlier than was their wont. I noted, too, that despite the normal mildness of the weather, our few hibernating creatures suddenly withdrew into their winter quarters; the hedgehogs to the drifts of leaves and hollow boles of dead trees, and the dormice to their nests in the low bushes. These incidents did not seem to concern me; though I was surprised at the abandonment of the fen by the otters, till presently I learnt that the late salmon had already passed up the river. That seemed to explain it; for the otters always follow the salmon, as every fox knows who has had the luck to find a half-eaten fish on the bank.

I am convinced that all these creatures were conscious of approaching hard weather; and when I discovered that the squirrels with which the wood abounded, had sought their nests in the top-most branches of the red pines, a sense of the evil times before us came to me, too.

I noticed while I lay from dawn to sunset amongst the undergrowth that a strange calm, presaging sudden change of weather, brooded over the solemn wood. The silence was unbroken until twilight, when the starlings settled in and mingled their vespers with the soughing of the rising wind.

Then when I left my lair, threaded the boles of the pines and came to the beeches, the leaves crackled under foot, a sign of cold dry weather; but I did not feel the keen wind until I gained the shoulder of the ridge to the north, which is crowned by the tor. At midnight on the moors the cold became intense; when, near dawn, I crossed the upland road which since some heavy rains had been a quagmire, I found it hard as rock, and the backwater of the pool above the ford was frozen to the edge of the current. On the marshy ground below, the cracking of the ice under my tread disturbed several snipe; and between the alders and my own lair two woodcock got up, which, from their weary flight, I should say had only just arrived.

My snug kennel under the furze looked doubly snug that cold, hard dawn; and whatever privations the future might have in store, there was at least every token of present abundance.

'The long-bills are pretty plentiful,' thought I, as I curled up on my dry couch. 'Hungry times are over; there will be food galore now.'

I slept through the day and sought the fen at nightfall, to find the pool and the mere, or rather

those parts of them that remained unfrozen, crowded with wild-fowl. Strangers though we were to one another, they proved very wary and difficult of approach, despite the curiosity my appearance aroused in them.

So matters stood for some time, during which I cared to remain out only part of the night; but when my coat got thick enough to resist the piercing cold I hunted far and late, seldom reaching my kennel before the sun showed red above the sea.

During the period of dry frost I fared well enough; but a snow-storm which occurred at the time of the new moon and lasted for two days and two nights, rendered foraging difficult, and made me feel a stranger in my own country. Except in rudest outline, it was no longer like itself. The fen was a great white plain, broken by a big and a small pool and the winding stream that fed them. In place of the sombre array of pines under the tor, usually as marked a feature in our landscape as were the great reed-beds themselves, a vast slope of snow met the eye; and the tor might have been a fleecy cloud in the leaden sky. Strangest of all was the aspect of the dunes,

which looked like great waves of pure foam arrested in their roll.

Many a time I scanned this white undulating waste for the hare that frequented the sandhills, hoping to mark him in a position where it would be possible to stalk him. I say 'possible' because of the great powdery drifts that rose like new dunes across my hidden trails and barred my progress in every direction. Moreover, each fall of snow caused me fresh trouble; for it stultified the knowledge I had gained, and compelled me to find new ways to my hunting grounds.

To add to my difficulties, soon only a few landmarks were left, and these hard to recognise—a horseshoe of thatch about the short chimney was all there was to show the position of the cottage, and it was hard to believe that the snow-laden elms were the same trees whose golden leafage but a month before had cast so deep a shadow on the farmyard where the cock pheasant had been feeding with the fowls. On the edge of the ploughed field next the mowhay were the tracks made by the two wary rabbits whose home was under the big rick, and the few partridges

which had escaped our jaws kept near the rubbing post in the middle of the field.

But I recall that fallow best by the course I had across it after the little jack-hare, who led me such a round as I have seldom gone. I lost sight of him in the field beyond the orchard, where the turnips lay in heaps, but followed his line up and down the hill to the head of the fen, across which he went almost in the teeth of a raging blizzard. He had ringed the bulrushes in the heart of the bog before making one of his baffling sidelong leaps, and then set his face for the foot-hills under my lair. The scent was hot amongst the scattered furze-bushes through which he led me, and so heavily clogged were his feet with snow that I felt sure I should overtake him before he reached the tamarisks on the other side of the hill; but I underrated his endurance. I followed him to the waste of sand-hills, only to find that he had disappeared in a drift at the foot of the highest dune. In his desperation—for I was all but on him—he must have plunged into this and worked his way far in, as I could not find him, though I dug and dug into the smothering mass in every direction. Nothing remained but to make my weary way

home through the blinding, driving storm. There are more blanks than prizes in the life of even a clever fox.

The scent lay wonderfully that night, and I followed it as easily as I had shortly before followed the scent of a bittern across the snow between the reed-bed and the bulrushes. It was in this isolated clump that the otters so often laid up before the frost hardened the trembling mass environing it; but now I noticed that some of these wily creatures had beaten a deep track across the narrow neck of the big bend of the river, though I did not once get a glimpse of them.

I must pass over much detail of the varying fortunes of that eventful time to speak of the misadventures that befel me on an expedition when I unwittingly exposed myself to a great danger, and was lucky to escape with my life. I had risen from my kennel, stretched myself, sniffed the biting wind, listened, shaken my thick coat, and then, as was my wont since giving up my journeys to the hills, first visited the few remaining bits of boggy ground in sheltered places of the brake, with the hope of picking up one of the woodcock that resorted there to feed. I approached one spot after another

against the wind and with the utmost stealth; but, despite my extreme caution, I succeeded only in flushing the birds, so wary had they become through being harassed—chiefly, I believe, by my own cubs.

After lapping some water below a cascade hung with icicles, I left the soft margin of the rapid runnel which had been riddled by the bills of the woodcock and, emerging from the furze, stole down to the thicket of blackthorns. But my nose told me a fox had been there already; so I at once made for my favourite pool, whence the cries of various wild-fowl reached my ears. I knew that they consisted of duck, widgeon, and teal; but from the noise they made, I judged them to be more numerous than usual, and so they proved.

Through a gap in the reeds I gazed once and again at the tantalizing sight. What more maddening spectacle for a hungry fox than that of game beyond his reach? I ransacked my brain to discover a way to get at them. It was beyond my powers. The edge of the acre of water that remained open was a score of yards from the reeds and scarcely less from the island. There was only one course practicable, to disturb the birds and to take up a hidden position from which I should

be within striking distance of the pool. The snowy surface which ringed them in denied concealment save at one point, and that was much too far from the water to suit my methods, for the scanty bit of cover was two long springs from the brink of the ice. Any attempt to rush the birds from there seemed vain. Many a time since the frost set in I had stood and weighed the chances it offered, only to scorn the idea of using it for an ambuscade. To-night, somehow—was it because of my ravenous hunger?—the clump of sags, though weighed down by the snow, did not look quite so hopeless as before the last fall; and I decided to accept its hard conditions and give it a trial. It was an exasperating thing to be obliged to scare the birds; but there was no help for it, and so forward I went.

My forefoot was hardly through the fringe of reeds when a mallard saw me and gave the alarm. In an instant a hundred pairs of eyes were turned on me; and, as if fascinated by the sight of so fine a fox, their owners did not take wing until I was nearly half-way across the snow. Then, with a loud 'quar, quar, quar' from the ducks, all the birds rose in a confused company, the noise of their

wing-beats drowning for a moment the loud rustling of the swaying reeds. I watched them divide into their several skeins, which then wheeled above my head and flew seawards, the widgeon in the van.

Before seeking my ambush, I crossed the ice to the other side of the pool, in the hope of finding a disabled bird in the thick cover, but saw nothing save a few dead starlings that had fallen from their roosting perches on the reeds. The flesh of starlings is nearly as loathsome to me as the flesh of carrion-feeding birds; so I left their stark bodies lying there, and trotted over the wide stretch of snow to the island. When crossing, I noticed a small hole in the ice. It had been made and kept open by otters that they might come there to breathe whilst fishing; but I did not know this at the time. The island, though it reeked with the smell of duck, was blank; so I made for the sags again, and crawled under them carefully in order not to disturb their white coating. Gently as I pushed my pointed muzzle between the stems the frozen snow rattled down in a shower, and this caused me much misgiving, for I feared that the exposed blades, black with decay, would be sure to excite

the suspicion of the quick-eyed fowl, and warn them off the water.

When ensconced, I found that my ambush barely screened me, and, what was more serious, it seemed much farther from the pool than in the bloodthirsty moment when I had decided to use it. However, being in, I meant to stay, and so, the tip of my muzzle between two bent blades that grew a few inches in front of the clump, and nothing but the tag of my brush projecting at the rear, I began my vigil. It was bitter work watching with the gale in your teeth, but I might have noticed it less had the ambush been a little nearer the water. Nevertheless, being of a sanguine temperament, I threw sense and sinew into my work as if success were assured. My ears were spread their widest, to catch any sound that reached them above the lapping of the water and the swish of the encompassing reeds; my eyes, if not fixed on the pool, scanned the snowy space between; and my legs were gathered under me ready to spring. One by one some feathers the ducks had left, drifted to the nearer side and were lost to sight; once I caught the faint wing-beats of passing wild-fowl and, raising my eyes, saw the long wedge of them black against

the bright stars; but not a bird settled on the water.

Hour after hour passed in this manner, and my patience was just giving out when an incident occurred that dispelled all thought of trying my luck elsewhere. It was not the fish that jumped clear of the surface, which induced me to stay, but the great boil in the water near where it fell. I believed this had been caused by an otter, and quite expected to see the creature land on a small jagged point of ice hard by, where the snow had been much trampled. Nor did mere curiosity keep me an interested spectator: I was expecting to get fish for supper after my wasteful friend had taken one or two bites of his prey. Whilst I watched for his appearance, and watched in vain, a rather larger fish leapt out—once—twice; and the third time it was hardly above the surface when the open jaws of a huge pike showed close behind it, and I could see the bristling array of teeth before a tremendous swirl hid them again. In all my experiences I have only once witnessed anything that took me more by surprise; and from that night I have never swum across to the island without fear of being seized by the grim monster which I now knew tenanted the pool.

The pike had scarcely disappeared before three teal, whose flight I had not heard, settled in the middle of the water and set my brush waving with excitement. Totally unsuspicious of my presence they swam towards me, and approached so close to the ice as to be completely hidden by the bank of snow near its edge. Judging their position as well as I could by the delicious scent that reached me, I made two tremendous leaps, which landed me amongst them before they could take wing. But on account of the spray and the shock of the icy-cold water I missed all three; though my jaws snapped close over the spot where one of them dived. He came up yards away from where I was awaiting him, rose as only a teal can rise, and flew off in company with his mates, who were wheeling about overhead.

With a rankling sense of failure I scrambled with some difficulty on to the ice, shook my coat and, turning my back on my ambush, trotted off as briskly as I could in the direction of the mere. Through the long wait on the snow and the coldness of the water into which I had plunged, my feet were so benumbed that I could scarcely feel them under me when crossing the bog. Nevertheless, I

stumbled on until warmth came back to them, and then hunted the waste beyond, working across the wind on the margin of the laid reed-beds in the hope of scenting moorhens or water-rail to break my long fast. Most carefully did I try the patches of sedgy cover in the loops of the stream where I had seldom failed; but even there I met with disappointment, the few birds I winded evading me by diving under the ice which in places covered the strong current.

I must have trotted miles along the zigzag course I took, before I reached the expanse of windswept snow under which lay the frozen mere. From inside the fringe of reeds I could hear the honking of the geese on the open water, and at times a sound that was new to me, a wild trumpeting which seemed to come from where the sea was thundering on the bar. For a fox naturally prompt in decision, I stood there long, considering whether to make a journey that offered but poor prospect of success. In the wild-fowl's feeding-ground I had come from there was at least makeshift for an ambush; on the level ice-field before me there was not cover enough to hide a mouse, and the chance of a kill was very, very small. Choice of supper,

however, lay between cold starling, bitter and dry, and hot goose, sweet and juicy—if I could get it—and goose or nothing was my resolve. I set my face for the spot where the scarcely discernible specks on the snow showed the game to be thickest; and if my coat turned white in winter like that of a stoat I had seen a few nights before, I might have stolen at least part of the way unobserved. As it was, my reddish-brown fur, though lighter than in the summer, made me as conspicuous as a crow on a stubble to the noisy sentinels overhead, which at once spread the cry of 'Fox afoot!' far and wide over the great mere. The only method possible, then, in this wild-goose chase, was to keep going with the most nonchalant air at my command, as if my sole object in approaching the pool was to wash down a heavy supper; and it was lucky for my plan that my thick coat hid my prominent ribs and concealed my half-starved condition.

Presently I could see that the wild-fowl lining the margin of the ice were nearly all geese; but what riveted my gaze was a small group of big white birds beyond, whose heads towered high above the mass of insignificant-looking duck that crowded the water.

'Halloo! something new in the feather line,' thought I. 'What monsters are these?'

And then it occurred to me that, as I had never cast eyes on their kind before, it might be that these strangers had never set eyes on a fox, and would entertain no fear of such an innocent-looking creature come to quench his thirst. This line of reasoning seemed so plausible that I licked my dry chops at the prospect of a lordly feast, and for a moment felt inclined to despise such small birds as geese. These latter had for some time held their heads turned my way; so, to show that concealment was not dreamt of, I stood still, raised my mask to the moon, just risen above the headland, and, though it cost me a great effort, barked as joyously as only a full-fed fox can bark. Rarely in my chequered life have I given utterance to notes so expressive of content; and as the geese seemed greatly taken by the music, I continued to indulge them, at the same time lessening the distance that separated us.

We were getting on quite good terms with one another—at least, so I thought—until I was within —well, it is difficult to judge distance over snow—perhaps fifty yards of them. Then I saw unmis-

takable signs of restlessness. To lull suspicion I waved my brush in my most fascinating manner; I rolled on my back, hoping to prove to them that, murderer though I might be by repute, I was really a playful creature, even on that wild winter's night; and in order to reassure the more timorous, including a fine gander, who had retired from the front to the rear rank, I began to cut capers, running after my brush in small circles, or rather in a spiral which would bring me, as I could see out of the corner of my eye, within rushing distance of two of the most curious of my admirers.

It was all in vain: my back was to the cowardly crew when they rose: but even then I should have seized a laggard had I sprung a few hairs higher, for the tip of my muzzle actually touched his cold webbed foot. In my fall on the edge of the ice I all but lost my balance and toppled into the water. Was I enraged when I recovered myself? I need not enlarge on that.

The flight of the geese alarmed the duck, which rose in a big cloud from the mere, with a noise that would, I am sure, have bewildered any animal except a fox, or perhaps an otter. But I ignored it, and amidst their silly clamour and the loud

whirr of their wings that momentarily drowned the gale, fixed my eyes on the three swans—for such they were — who did not take flight like the others, but swam up and down the rough water in a manner which, if not expressive of contempt, was at least aggressive and provocative. Their attitude was a revelation to me; no bird had ever dared challenge me before; and if they see as foxes do, these black-billed strangers who stared so hard must have read blank amazement on my innocent face as I read defiance on theirs. Nor was I free from irritation at the bravado conspicuous in their puffed-out breasts and beruffled plumage.

Suddenly my demeanour changed from amazement to rage. This certainly they must have known from my flaming eyes, bristling fur, and fluffed-out brush lashing from side to side; but up and down they swam, hissing out their summons to come and do battle, if I dared. A fox shrink from combat with feathered foes? Never! With hackles up, I jumped into the water, and swam across the strong current for the spot they had chosen for the contest. All three preserved their determined front until I was close enough to

see the yellow on their bills and the snake-like look in their evil eyes, but at my next stroke two of them beat the water with their great wings, rose in the air, and with loud-creaking pinions flew over my head.

'Cowards!' said I. 'Why did you not stand your ground?'

Whilst I wondered that the remaining bird did not follow their example, a streak of blood on his white plumage told me he was wounded; and the instant it caught my eye I felt he was mine. I never doubted I should kill him as soon as I could close my jaws on his long white neck: the only thing that troubled me was how I should manage to land him on the ice with such a strong stream running. He was the biggest of the three, a magnificent bird, and, except for his bill, as white as the snow. To my astonishment, wounded though he was, he actually swam to meet me and struck the first blow. Before I could close with him he stretched his head over mine, caught me by the left ear, and pressed me under water. For all my frantic struggles, I was half drowned when I succeeded by a desperate effort in disengaging myself from his grip. Rising close to him, I seized his neck

through the thick coat of feathers that protected it, and hung on. The commotion that followed baffles description. With one wing—for the other lay helpless—he lashed the water and spun round in circles, taking me with him. It would have been better to let go than be carried by the strong current I knew not whither; but in such a case a fox can never resolve to relinquish his hold, and it was fortunate for me that, before I had been taken out into the middle of the mere, my teeth slipped off the smooth oily feathers.

I had had enough. Exhausted and benumbed, I made for the ice, now a long way off, and, fighting the current with all my strength, had got at length within a few yards of the jagged edge when, to my horror, I heard the swan coming up, and gaining on me at every stroke. I did my very utmost to reach the ice, but in vain; he was on me before I could land. Again I was immersed; twice I planted my feet on the edge, only to be pulled back. I had caught a Tartar, and escape seemed impossible; even if he did not drown me, I feared I should be sucked under the ice. The thought of losing my life roused me to a supreme effort. With gnashing teeth I turned on my persecutor. My onset

I DRAGGED MYSELF ON TO THE ICE "

must have terrified him, for he quailed before it and retreated a few yards into the mere. With the help of my brush I whipped round, gained the rough edge, and, putting forth my last bit of strength, dragged myself on to the ice, and fell, utterly spent, just beyond his reach.

For a time I lay there motionless, but by-and-by fear moved me to turn my head and look for my enemy. There he was, proudly swimming up and down before me with bloodstained breast and drooping wing, still defiant. It was the most humiliating moment of my life. Presently I rose and shook myself, but to no purpose. My bedraggled coat had frozen, and hung stiffly on me. I exchanged looks of vengeance with my terrible foe and slunk away. His broken wing kept him a prisoner in his domain, but he was lord of it.

What a weary journey it was over the snow! How I floundered through the deep drift that separated me from my cover, and how glad I was to reach the friendly shelter of the brake! It was good to be screened from the eyes of the countless wildfowl who had watched the fight, and whose cries had sounded like jeers as I tottered across the wide

ice-field. There is little bark left in a fox when the quacking of ducks disconcerts him and makes his brake a welcome refuge.

I sat down under the furze, brushed the bloody feathers from my muzzle and licked my paws, which had been cut by the sharp-edged ice in my mad struggles to get out of the water. Though dawn was some two hours off, I had no heart for any more hunting; so I made for my lair, which I reached by way of the brambly thicket above the quarry, and, after shaking my coat again, crept to where my snug kennel lay under its double roof of gorse and snow. There, hidden from all eyes and from the bright lights of the frosty sky, I curled up in the cup of dry spines with my brush about my nose, and heedless of the gale that raged above but could not reach me, forgot my troubles in sleep.

CHAPTER VII

A REIGN OF TERROR

THE hounds drew the tor wood once, and only once, after the thaw, and did not pay a single visit to our brake, though the earth was stopped three times before the end of the season. The explanation is probably to be found in the heavy rains which flooded the fen and made the country unfit for hunting; big pools were found where none were seen before, and the springs which broke out in many new places, together with the surface-drainage of rain and melted snow, not only kept them full, but seemed to turn every bit of spongy ground into a quagmire.

Left to ourselves, my little mate and I—for we had come together again—were as happy as foxes can be, and, forgetting the hardships we had passed through, looked forward with pleasurable

anticipation—as, indeed, every wildling does—to the golden days of summer, when troubles are few and delights many. Yet the tamarisks had hardly begun to feather before there was brought into our quiet countryside a hound which proved to be the most terrible enemy that ever shadowed my life.

That the farmer had need of a more watchful guardian for the poultry-yard than old Shep I knew well enough from the serious losses he had sustained. Besides fowls and ducks, even geese and turkeys had been carried off, some by day under cover of mist and drizzling rain, but mostly at night. I had seen foxes returning from that direction with birds in their mouths; I had actually come on the caches, both inside and outside our brake, where they had buried what they could not take away; and this wholesale plundering caused me great anxiety, because I knew it would be put down to us and lead to reprisals. But I never dreamt in my most troubled moments of the scourge that was being prepared for us. Even had I known that old Shep was to be superseded and another farm-dog put in his place the news would not have alarmed me in the least, because of the contempt I felt for the few specimens I had seen.

But I was now to learn that there are farm-dogs and farm-dogs.

As soon as the new dog was led home I came on evidence of his work. I found the body of a fox near the gap of a reclaimed field that had recently been filched from our cover, and could see by the fang-marks in his chest that he had been murdered. Now it was impossible that old Shep should be the culprit. He was always asleep at midnight, and bore a good character amongst us for utter harmlessness ; yet everything pointed to his guilt. A double trail led from the warm carcass towards the farm buildings, and one was the trail of a dog. I walked slowly up the hill, trying to unravel the mystery, and had scarcely passed over the crest when a loud bay, very different from old Shep's, broke the stillness of the night and explained everything. Whilst I listened it was repeated again and again, and its meaning was unmistakable. It was a warning to the fox from the new guardian of the farmyard that the days of robbery without punishment were past, and that a new régime had begun. I yapped no reply, for it was best to let this dangerous customer believe that the fox he had killed was a stranger to

the district, and that none frequented the wild within reach of his voice. Then I hurried to the earth and found the vixen in a state of alarm.

'What's all this to-do ?' she asked.

'Tis only a raucous puppy baying the new moon,' I replied, as contemptuously as I could. 'Get back to your litter; I can hear them calling you.'

A fox has many parts to play, and if I had not dissembled my fear and concealed the truth, it is likely that the vixen's milk would have been soured, and the whelps disordered. But I was very miserable. Putting all together, I was convinced that the new-comer would prove a dangerous enemy; and yet I felt that I ought to see him, for I recollected my mother's story of the fox who, like the otter in the quaking bog, judged the jackass by his bray, and suffered agonies until he cast eyes on him.

The opportunity offered a few days later without my seeking it. On a lovely spring morning such as Nature often lavishes on her wildlings, I lay stretched out amongst the scattered furze-bushes enjoying the warmth of the sun, without a thought of any intrusion on the peaceful scene. The lambs were bleating in the field next the dunes, the rooks

cawing in the leafing elms, and the farm-boy, whom I could not see for the thicket of blackthorns at the foot of the croft, was singing the drowsy song he sang always at his work. A magpie on the tallest of the blackthorns seemed unusually interested in either the boy or his work; but I thought nothing of that. Presently, however, to my surprise, it began mobbing some creature. Then I rose to my feet, almost expecting to view a fox, when, to my amazement, I saw a huge dog leave the thicket and come into the open. It was the new hound, and the sight of him made me catch my breath. What struck me most—for without it, size and strength of jaw signify nothing—was the speed I read in his long muscular limbs. He moved with an ease I had never seen in any other dog. Had his hind-quarters sloped like mine, I should, like the magpie, have taken him for a denizen of the wild; but the defect betrayed him as the servant of man.

My curiosity was excited, and I would not steal away to the near brake until I had discovered what his business was. It was of the simplest. He stopped about half-way up the hill at a spot full in the hot sun, turned round two or three times as I do

to make my bed, and laid himself down amongst the tussocks of grass. I watched his bloodshot eyes blink in the blazing light; noted his restlessness, the twitching of his cropped ears, and the quivering of his great nostrils, even whilst he seemed to doze; studied his huge bull-terrier head, raised when a yellow-hammer settled on the golden bush behind him; shuddered at the array of crowded teeth when he yawned.

He may have lain an hour amid the bright new herbage before the boy whistled. His ears showed that he heard, but he took no further notice. When the whistle was repeated he growled. Then the boy screamed, as I have heard the huntsman scream after me; and the great brindled brute leapt to his feet and bounded down the hill at a pace I had not thought any creature capable of. I knew then that no fox could get away from him in the open, or escape with his life when overtaken.

'No more stealing of old gobblers,' said I under my breath as I slunk away to the earth to warn the vixen not to go near the farm.

'What in the world is the matter now?' said she when I reached the den. 'Your face is enough to frighten the cubs out of their young senses.'

IN FULL CRY." *Page 206.*

'My face?' said I. 'What is the matter with it? Do you want my mask to wear a fool's look always? Your frivolity vexes me. However, don't go near the farm again; that puppy is more dangerous than I thought.' And so saying, I left the earth with as good a grace as I could before she could question me. I had forgotten that my face might be reflecting my feelings. If it did, I do not wonder that the vixen in her ignorance of the cause should have reproved me. Perhaps it would have been better if I had opened my heart and let her know all, but I shrank from adding to the anxiety of bringing up four little cubs; and whenever I felt myself on the point of telling her the truth about the hound, as I did once or twice, I snapped my jaws on my too ready tongue and beat a hasty retreat.

Had I thought that our lives would be imperilled only when we were rash enough to cross the boundary wall of the farm, I should not have taken such a gloomy view of the situation; but I foresaw that such would not be the case. For some days I scarcely slept on account of the worry it caused me; and the more I thought it over in the quiet of my kennel, the surer I felt that

this great restless hound would render life unbearable by invading our cover. Was it likely that a creature pricked by pride of limb and of fang would be content to wander within the narrow confines of a dozen fields criss-crossed with trails, and never trespass on the environing wilds to which the trails led? Impossible! Is there not an eternal feud between the tame and the wild canine? This half-wild protégé of man, free to wander at will and wreak his vengeance on us hated dwellers in the brake, able too by speed and strength to carry out his fell designs, was certain, sooner or later, to follow the cursed scent that lingers where we tread, and track us to our hidden lairs.

The days went by, however, and we were not molested; though night after night, as I heard his threatening bay, I asked myself, How long shall we be left in peace? When a fortnight passed without a sign, I began to think that this sharer of man's hearth might, after all, be nothing more than a noisy farmyard braggart, brave enough, perhaps, on grass or plough-land, but afraid to trespass on the waste. Rudely was my mistake brought home to me.

Now what I am going to tell is not something

I have heard: I saw it with my own eyes on the moor which rises from the head of the fen. I was trotting along at the time, planning how best to work the ground on such a still night, when a fox—a stranger to me—came over the brow on my left, and dashed across my front at a gallop. At first I thought he must have some game in sight; but as neither hare nor leveret was to be seen, I could not help, in the absence of any apparent reason for his conduct, imagining that he must be mad, like a fox I once saw crossing the bar. Strange fancy, perhaps; but then, what sane animal, and, above all, what fox, would waste his speed after nothing? And what in the world was there for the fugitive to fly from? Suddenly I thought of the hound, and as suddenly, just when the fox had disappeared where the land dipped, I heard the thud of heavy feet. Peeping between two boulders that concealed me from view, I saw him come over the crest at the spot where I first caught sight of the fox. He was running by scent, but at so tremendous a pace that I feared the fox could not live before him.

His silence chilled me more than his loud bay; but though I could not detect the faintest whimper,

every moment there was a strange clicking sound —a noise foreign to the moorland. When he came abreast of me I saw it was caused by the broken chain that hung from his neck and struck the steel collar he wore. In a twinkling the dusky fiend had disappeared in the gloom, his head set for the tor. I listened. After a time I heard him crash through a long bramble thicket. Then a long interval. Then the owls, which had been very noisy, suddenly ceased their midnight chorus. They were watching the tragic chase between the boles of the pines. How it ended I never knew; but I am inclined to think that the fox reached the rocks and escaped. If he had been killed, the foxes which lodged on the western slope of the tor would have forsaken their coverts, at least for a time; and this they did not do.

That night it was useless to try to hunt, as I kept looking back every dozen strides for fear the hound might be following me. At last I gave it up; but I did not return along my usual trail, laid when the night had no fear for me. I avoided open ground as much as possible, to steal along tangled dips and gullies. Before crossing a ridge I halted to peer through the darkness, fearful of

seeing the sinister green eyes that would apprise me of the hound's approach.

On reaching the double trail, I cleared it at a bound, as though it had been a line of fire, and made for the river at the spot where it spreads over the marshes; for I hoped by swimming it at its widest part to add to the difficulties of the hound if he should follow me. Although the precautions I took proved unnecessary, I mention a few of them to show the fear the creature had inspired in me. After that I used to foil the runs in the brake for the purpose of puzzling him if he chanced to strike my night's trail and tried to trace me to my lair.

But of what avail were all my wiles against a creature so endowed? At length the marvellous powers he possessed enabled him not only to find my kennel, but to approach it so noiselessly as almost to surprise me in my sleep. Had it not been for the slight rustling of the furze, caused by his grim protruding muzzle, he must have taken me where I lay as a fox takes a rabbit in its seat. Enraged at my escape, he came crashing after me. I led him to the cover beyond the quarry, where the furze was close and stunted, and where the runs were so small

that he had to force a way along them. In these unfavourable conditions I thought he would soon tire of pursuit; but to my surprise he persisted hour after hour, despite the stifling atmosphere of the brake on such a close, hot day. Could he have driven me into the open I should have been at his mercy; I knew this as well as he, and never gave him the chance he longed for. Of course the earth was open to me, but I would rather have died than betrayed the whereabouts of the vixen and cubs by going to ground.

In the end I wearied him out, and none too soon, for I was almost spent before he relinquished the chase. I had escaped, but my dread of the fiend was greater than ever—so great, indeed, that I never went near the brake again as long as he lived, and instead of carrying food to the earth, I left it at a spot in an unfrequented corner of the fen, where by arrangement the vixen came nightly to fetch it.

The silence of the night at this time was painful. A dog-fox dared no longer call to his mate for fear of betraying his whereabouts to the hound, now abroad at all hours; and the vixens had to check the cubs from uttering their little stifled barks. I

hardly dared sleep two days following in the same place, lest in his wanderings he should have come upon my couch and be there awaiting me. We lived under a reign of terror, and the gloom that brooded over brake, tor, and fen spread to the higher moors, where the hound had once been seen. But, gloom or no gloom, the cubs had to be fed, and I had to contribute to their support, though every journey I made to the fen was at the risk of my life.

Generally I was at the rendezvous with any food I had, early enough to enable me by hurrying to be back in my couch in gorse or heather before dawn. One morning, however, I was so late that I decided to lie up for the day in the fen rather than risk crossing the moors after daybreak.

Through the mist that lay over the heart of the bog I could just make out the tall clump of rushes where I meant to lie up if the slough should yet prove firm enough to bear my weight, and the instant the vixen fetched the leveret I had brought I went off at a fast trot. On striking the river, which was still much above the previous summer's level, I waded into the water, and, to throw the hound out in the event of his following me, floated some distance with the current before landing on

the opposite side. As I rustled through the flags and the belt of reeds, whose dew-laden plumes were sparkling in the first rays of day, a heron rose lazily and, skimming a reed bed, flew away towards the half-risen sun, leaving me, as far as I could see, the sole tenant of the silent marshland. Only the bare, flat quagmire now lay between me and my harbourage, and, anxious to be hidden from sight, I lost no time in setting out across the treacherous surface.

I selected a line which seemed to promise the firmest footing, and stepped with all possible lightness. Yet, in spite of every care, I sank deep in places, and midway the crust was so thin that for a while I was in great danger of foundering. However, by putting forth all my strength, I was able, at last, to free myself from the clutches of the more liquid mire and reach the drier, sounder surface between it and the rushes. I was indeed glad to feel the solid ground under my feet once more.

Had I realized the peril before setting out I should not have attempted to cross. I ought, perhaps, to have turned back on striking the dangerous zone; but, once embarked on an under-

taking, it is not in my nature to retreat, for there is that in a fox which makes him go through with his purpose at all hazards, though it may compel him to pass between the legs of the huntsman's horse or traverse a bog that threatens to swallow him up.

At last, exhausted and bemired, I entered the clump, whose shadow lay like a wide road across that part of the quagmire where it fell, and chose for my couch a tall heap of dead reeds just inside the wall of pale green stems. It seemed to have served for a nest of the captive wild swan, and had probably been floated to the spot by the subsiding flood.

To reach my bed I had to cross the stream which drained the pool within the dense ring of bulrushes; and as I waded through it a well-known scent reached my nostrils, and told me that the wiliest creature of the night had also sought this isolated retreat to hover in. I watched the sedgy islet whence the scent proceeded, expecting to get a glimpse of the otter couching there; but he lay low and did not expose a hair, despite the crackling of the reeds as I made my bed.

I was free now to attend to my toilet and prepare

for the rest I so much needed. With my pads dirty as they were, sleep was out of the question; so I licked them and my legs as clean as I could, and, thus refreshed, soon dozed off, with a sense of security to which I had long been a stranger.

I slept soundly, without the horrid dreams of the previous weeks, and was awakened at last by the hum of insects. A year before, when I often lay in the fen, my ears would not have noticed this loud undertone of noonday life; but latterly I had, for the most part, kennelled in the moors, where were only noiseless butterflies and lizards, silent as sphinxes. I was not really sorry to be disturbed, for it was delightful to lie there, vaguely conscious of the warmth of the sun and looking about me in a drowsy way. I turned my blinking eyes now to the distant mere, sparkling at the end of a vista in the reeds, now to the hoary summit of the tor seen against the blue sky, and again to the water-insects at sport on a small pool just beyond the black shadow which had crept up well-nigh to the foot of the bulrushes.

Presently, tiring of the view, I was about to drop asleep again, when I heard a noise which, if it had been less violent, I should have thought to be

caused by an animal shaking itself. It was followed by a commotion on the river-bank, and then, to my horror, the hound burst through the reeds. He had followed my trail to that point, and guessed where I was, for he kept looking at the clump, and even at the part of it where I was crouching. He threw up his nose and sniffed the air, as I could see by the working of his gleaming nostrils; but there was no wind to carry the scent across the morass—not enough, indeed, to stir the light feathery tops of the reeds behind him. Soon he advanced to the very edge of the bog and looked longingly at the clump, as if he were eager to reach it but dared not risk the crossing. At last, after running up and down the edge several times, apparently in search of a hard place, he decided to brave the danger, and with cat-like steps, ludicrous to watch in such a monster, began the perilous passage. He was soon up to his knees, and the deeper he went the greater my excitement grew. Every instant I expected to see him sink out of sight. So sure of it did I feel that I almost ventured to show myself and fling at the fiend the reproaches that crowded to my tongue. But though his progress was very slow, he was inch

by inch reducing the distance that separated us. Before long he was near enough for me to hear the sucking noise made by the slough as it reluctantly released its grip on the long muscular legs. He did not pick and choose his way, or deviate by a reed's breadth from the straight course that would bring him to the gap in the belt of rushes made by the overflow. Now he was on the most treacherous part of the quagmire, which shook with the struggle he made to keep his head above the surface. With dilated pupils I watched what must be his last efforts. I noted the rise of the mire on his collar, till at last it rose no farther, but still he came on; and then I noticed the liquid mud raised in front of him like the ripple in front of a swan. Wading he must have been, though he looked exactly as though he were swimming; and his great red tongue lolled out with the frantic exertions he made.

When he got nearer his feet must have found the bottom, for his shoulders rose free of the surface; and I saw his hair bristle as though something had suddenly angered him. He had scented me or the otter, or both; and in his haste to add to the number of his victims, he ploughed through the

last score yards of mud like a mad creature. Along the muddy bed of the overflow he toiled step by step; and the instant he entered the pool, I rose to my feet, doubtful whether to stay or retreat, and paused to listen before committing myself.

At that moment I heard a sullen plunge, then another, as two otters dived into the pool. Thinking there was safety in numbers, I decided to remain in hiding rather than trust to my slight chance of escape across the bog. The wild struggles of the hound told me he had viewed the otters; but he must have lost them again, for presently all was very quiet, though I could hear him at times nosing the rushes and ferns round the pool, as if in search of them. My eyes were as alert as my ears, and soon caught a heave on the surface of the overflow and the gleam of an otter's back as the creature rounded the shallow bend leading to the river. A few seconds later I saw the other otter glide noiselessly away, and then a great fear seized me as I realized that I was left alone with the hound.

Scarcely were my eyes back on the pool before he landed on the islet, where he stood with the

water dripping from his brindled coat, whilst with nostrils raised he sniffed the air. As I watched him through the stems, I became aware that he winded me ; and when I saw him take to the water and head straight for my hiding-place, I stole silently but swiftly away and, fearful of trusting to the muddy bed of the stream, committed myself to the bog.

I trod its treacherous surface as lightly as I could, but because of the smallness of my feet I kept breaking through the crust, and made only slow progress. Nevertheless I succeeded in getting farther than I expected before the hound sighted me. As soon as he did he burst through the rushes and, making a tremendous spring, landed within a few yards of where I was struggling with the mire.

This wild leap of his saved me. Had he been content to follow at his best pace, the chances are that he would have caught me before I could reach the bank of the river ; but now, through the violence of his fall, he was so deeply embedded that I gained many yards before he could extricate himself. Indeed, by the time he had done so I had reached the more liquid part of the morass where I had all but foundered at sunrise. With the double

danger threatening me, I exerted myself even more than then ; but, madly as I struggled, my progress was not nearly as fast as that of the hound, now overhauling me. It was horrible to hear this murderous fiend whimpering and whining in his eagerness to get at me, and to feel that I was scarcely advancing at all. I was like a fox in a nightmare, only I was never more wide awake in my life. Fright however kept urging me on, and to my joy I at last felt firmer ground under my feet.

The bank gained, I turned my head for an instant, and saw my pursuer seemingly stuck in the treacherous mud-belt ; but I did not waste precious time watching him. That he still reckoned me his I felt sure ; that I should escape I had little hope ; nevertheless, I meant to do my utmost to save my life. I galloped down-stream close to the water's edge, took the otter's path across the neck of the bend, swam the river, and on landing plunged into the great reed-brakes.

On, on I went at my full speed, driven by mortal fear. I knew I was not yet out of danger. Here a wild-duck rose in affright, there a moorhen scurried out of my way ; but I kept straight on past

clumps of osmunda ferns and flags, and across back-waters till at last, after swimming a maze of water-ways, I came to the grassy promontory that flanks the inflow of the river into the mere.

For a moment I stood there irresolute. Should I take to the water or trust to the bordering reeds? Whilst I hesitated, I thought I heard the hound coming, and the next instant dropped into the stream. Partly by swimming, but chiefly by the aid of the current, I succeeded in reaching the nearest islet of the little archipelago that studded the rippled expanse. There I hoped to find refuge from my relentless pursuer.

I had arrived only just in time, for, peeping through the sedgy growth that covered my hiding-place, I saw the hound gallop to the end of the promontory and stand there gazing over the wide surface. Presently he retreated into the cover that margined a creek, and I lost sight of him. After a time he came back, and again scanned the mere as though he knew I had taken to the water, but wondered how I managed to make myself invisible. Then he withdrew again to the brake that rose like a lofty wall about the mere. I could trace his progress by the rising of the wild-fowl whose

sanctuaries he invaded, and later by the glimpse I got of the angered swan swimming defiantly across the narrow opening of a big creek about which the array of reeds was densest. I watched and watched, turning my eyes now to the bar, now to the promontory, now to the bays between, but saw no further sign of the brute that had so rudely violated the summer peace of the fenland.

CHAPTER VIII

TREED

For nearly a month afterwards I was able, more by luck than by cunning, to evade my persecutor. Nevertheless, I had two very narrow escapes. Once, without a suspicion of my presence, he passed within a few feet of a shallow rabbit-hole where I was laid up. If he had found me I should not have had a chance, for he could dig like a badger.

After this I took care not to be belated, and so prevented from reaching before sun-up one of my lairs on the moors. Sometimes I kennelled amongst the crags on the jagged ridge, sometimes in the valley of rocks where I had fought, but most often in a small brake below a cairn nearer the fen. It happened whilst I frequented this patch of furze that a man came to stack turf on the

opposite slope. He knew nothing of my presence; and as his work was not of a noisy kind, I did not trouble to shift my quarters. I was generally curled up two or three hours before I heard him cross the ridge over which he came to his work, and in the course of a few days the sound of his shod feet on the rocks became familiar.

One morning, too, I recognised the farm-boy again by his song, and was surprised to hear him pass along the edge of the cover where I was lying and climb the rocks overlooking it. When he reached the top of the cairn he began to whistle and call, screaming now and again at the top of his voice, as I had heard him scream on the day I first saw the hound.

'Es eh still runnin' wild?' shouted the turf-cutter when the boy ceased calling.

'Iss, you,' replied the boy, with his hands to his mouth; ''tes a week come to-morrow since we catched sight of un.'

'Theere waant be a fox left in the country, rate he's goin' on. Have ee searched the tor wood?'

'Tor wood—iss, and right down to the cliffs. I was out all day yesterday screechin' for un till my throat's sore, and I'm bone-tired traapsing aifter

the ugly git vagabond. Haben seed nawthen of un, spose ?'

'Nawthen at all.'

That very night I saw the hound standing motionless and alert on the fringe of a clump of furze a little way down the valley, as if to learn whether he was observed. Presently he stole up the dusky slope on his murderous round, with a stealth that put him outside the pale of the tame and stamped him as a beast of the wild.

If his kennel was in the furze, he had heard the boy's screaming, and disregarded it; but I do not know whether that was so or not, for I was afraid to go near any spot where his scent lay. Indeed it seemed to me that no place was safe from him, and that, sooner or later, I should meet with the fate that had befallen so many others. I knew of four foxes, or rather of three, after the one on the farm was buried, lying dead where they had been overtaken. One lay between the mere and the headland, another in a coppice bordering the salmon river, and the third, a very fine fox, on a bit of rushy ground between the quaking bog and the nearest point of the tor wood. Strangely enough, all four were dog-foxes, and all bitten

through the chest, the marks where the fangs had penetrated the vitals still showing amid the breast-fur, dyed with blood.

However, I did not give way to despair, but resolved to employ every precaution my sharpened wits could suggest for the preservation of the life that was so sweet to me. At one time I kennelled on the dunes, at another on the waste land beyond the tor, and more than once under the hayrick within sight of the hound's bed of straw at the foot of the barn-steps. I became, indeed, as great a wanderer as a dog-otter, my roaming being restricted only by the necessity of reaching at least an hour before dawn the place to which I brought food for the vixen and litter.

Every morning I begged her to move the cubs to some place free from the terror of the murderous hound, where she could take them out and teach them to hunt; but I begged in vain. I am not going to blame her, though if she had listened to my entreaties I should have escaped the most harrowing experience of my life. No incident is so burnt into my memory: of none are the details so vivid.

It wanted an hour to sunrise when I was trotting

to a holt under the tor which I had lately occupied, and just as I was near enough to the wood to distinguish the stems of the trees, I heard something coming up behind me. Looking back, I saw it was the hound, and the next instant was in full flight. If ever I flew in my life, it was over that stretch of sward which slopes upwards from the marsh and forms a foothill of the tor. I made straight for the pine-wood, where I hoped to shake off my pursuer by dodging among the boles ; but his leaps were so prodigious that I soon found I should hardly be able to reach it. What would I not have given in my extremity for a pile of loose rocks or even a rabbit-hole ! But there was no such refuge.

I was in despair when the slightly slanting trunk of a tree caught my eye, and I half ran, half clambered up it until I gained a spot well beyond the reach of the maddened, leaping fiend below me. There I clung, to steady myself, and when my panting became less violent I climbed without much difficulty as far as a bare place that lightning or some falling tree had stripped of bark. I saw at a glance that I should need my utmost skill to get past that. The surface was quite

bleached, and nearly as smooth as the pebbles on the bar. Over and over again I tried to reach a rotten-looking stump just beyond it, only to slip back at every attempt. Once I was all but gone; the grip of my forelegs alone saved me. After that I clung to the rough bark for awhile and, whilst I rested, looked down to see what had become of my enemy. There was the gaunt brute stretched out on the pine needles at the foot of the tree, his head uplifted and his thoughts asking what my next move would be. The sight of his small, cruel eyes, though it sent a cold shiver through me, spurred me to fresh effort, and I made another attempt. Hitherto I had crawled along the smooth surface, so as to be ready to grip the bole the instant my claws lost their hold. Now I resolved, come what might, to make a run and take my chance of reaching the branch. Better, I thought, perish at once if I should fail than hang on where I was until I dropped from exhaustion. How I managed it I hardly know, but I succeeded in getting my forepaws over the branch just as my hind pads slipped. For a moment I dangled wildly in the air. Luckily the branch held, and was strong enough to bear the strain I put on it in drawing myself up to the

angle between it and the tree. From this fork I climbed up and up until I gained the topmost limbs, reddening in the rays of dawn; and there in a rude cradle formed by the branches I lay down at full length under the waving green dome.

It was a strange kennel for a fox, but though I could not curl up in it, I should have been happy enough if it had not been for the murderer at the foot of the tree. Try as I might, I could not forget him any more than I could help looking down every now and again to see whether he was still there. Fortunately for me the strangeness of my situation in some measure distracted my attention from its dangers, for I was overlooking a sea of green, stirred into movement by the wind.

For awhile no living creature stirred, but before the sun was well above the horizon my feathered enemies found me, and added to my troubles. A jay came flying over the pine-tops and settled on a branch near. I had crouched my flattest, but it was of no use. He either saw or smelt me or both, and what a craking row he made! Had I murdered all his kin the villain could not have railed at me with greater virulence. His clamour vexed me, and, what was ten times worse, it advertised my where-

abouts to every tenant of the wood. Then a crow came and perched on a bough above the jay; by his side settled a magpie, and all three abjects mocked me to their heart's content. I gnashed my teeth at them, but that only made them worse. I was in misfortune, and for hours I had to put up with insults I could neither escape from nor resent. At last my feathered persecutors tired of their insulting taunts, and flew away to seek food and water. Lucky birds to fly where they listed!

At noon a pigeon settled on a branch close by and began to coo, but the moment he espied me he fled in affright. Later a crimson-crested woodpecker discovered me, and he too took wing, filling the silent wood with bitter laughter. Then for hours I listened to the soughing of the rising wind, and it was not until the late afternoon that a squirrel arrived to scold me with angry chatterings when he found me between him and his nest. I knew as well as he that I had no right to block his way, but how could I help it?

Then I began to suffer from thirst, and longed to be free to go and drink in the mere that reflected the after-glow lighting up the stormy sky. The hound evidently suffered in the same way. The

stars were scarcely out before the brute rose, shook himself, sat on his haunches and licked his dry chops. 'Thirsty, are you, my enemy? Why not go and quench your thirst before resuming your vigil?' said I, but the winds carried the whisper away.

I was still intent on his movements when, to my horror, I caught sight of a fox coming towards the tree. Recognising the danger, I raised our warning cry. In all my life I never saw any creature more surprised, and surprised he well might be when 'kek, kek!' came as it were from the sky. Hearing my voice, the hound, which had lain down again, jumped to his feet and looked about him eagerly, as I could see by the quick shiftings of his head. The fox was a fool, and still came on; so I gave the alarm again as loudly as my dry throat would allow. Instantly a pair of green eyes were directed at me through the gloom, and when the fox sighted me, he must have wondered what in the world I was doing at the top of that tall tree. He soon knew. Scarcely had he jumped a fallen pine that lay in his way before he was face to face with the hound. What a scurrying followed! In and out amongst the stems the chase went on; but

though the fox twisted and turned, the hound was closing in and pressing him towards the sward over which I had galloped for dear life. The poor fellow might have gained my tree, but he missed his opportunity ; and then the hound had him at his mercy. One of his leaps was as long as two of the fox's, and soon he was close up to his victim. I turned my head away. When I ventured to look again the fox was lying on his side dead, his white fur showing like snow in the moonlight.

His murderer had already left the carcass, and was galloping back to the tree. He was evidently afraid I might have stolen away, but his nose assuring him that I had not, he curled up once more in the pit he had scratched in the needles. For a while despair held me, and I became almost dead to my surroundings. The owls might hoot or hiss at me, but I took no more notice of them than of the squeaking bats that circled about the pines in the morning twilight, or of the boisterous wind that heralded the wild and lurid dawn. The wind rose with the sun until it blew a gale that threatened to devastate the wood. The heavy tree-tops swayed and swung; branch grated against branch or snapped off, and now and again a tree

fell with a crash. To me these sounds were very disturbing, but the hound took no more notice of them than did a raven that had perched on the carcass of the fox; indeed, he seemed as composed as when he lay under the gorse-bush the day I first saw him, and for hours he never stirred, except to look up at me or to lick his chops.

It was well past noon when at last he got up and trotted off in the direction of the fen. I followed every step, and as he got farther and farther away my spirits rose, because I believed he was unable to endure his thirst any longer and was making for the nearest water. Simpleton that I was to suppose he could abandon his murderous purpose so readily! To quench his thirst! It was nothing but a ruse to decoy me to the ground, where I should be at his mercy. In vain, however, is an ambush occupied in sight of a fox. As I saw him enter a clump of brambles, I lay still where I was, watching; but not a sign of him did I see until sundown, when he left its shelter and returned to the foot of the tree.

What patience this creature showed! what indifference to the raging storm! The wind shrieked through the usually silent aisles of the wood as I

have never heard it since, and whirled the pine needles as I had seen snowflakes whirled by the blizzard; but it did not disturb the hound. Hour after hour I looked down on him from my rocking eyrie, and in the middle of the night it rejoiced me to see him continually lift his head and turn his horrid green eyes on me at such short intervals that I knew his endurance was nearly spent, and that thirst was urging him to raise the siege and seek the water. Twice he set out for the nearest pool, but each time he came galloping back, to find that I had made no attempt to escape.

When an hour later he started once more, the instant he passed the sward I rose, despite the wild swaying of my perch, and peered through the darkness to learn whether he really had gone. The darkness soon swallowed up his dusky form, and then I asked myself the question: Shall I accept the opportunity for escape? If I kept to the tree until he returned with thirst allayed I was doomed; if I reached the ground I might find him awaiting me; but there was just the chance that I might not, and that chance I resolved to take.

I crawled along the branch as fast as I dared. With the rocking of the tree and the force of

the blast it was dangerous work, but, aided by my good brush, I kept my balance, and so gained the main stem. Then, as quickly as I could, I let myself down from branch to branch until I reached the decayed limb where I had got my first hold in the ascent. From this last resting-place I looked at the bare, white patch, and a glance told me how likely I was to slip from it; but, following the advice of my dear mother, never to look twice at a nasty place, I clutched the smooth surface as best I could and trusted to luck to land me safely.

Before I could realize that I had shot past it I struck the ground violently, and then fell backwards head over heels. In a trice I was on my feet, and fleeing through the wood as madly as though the hound were at my heels. In and out amongst the standing stems I dodged, and under and over the fallen ones. What havoc the storm had wrought! In some places it had almost levelled the wood, which, as I sped along, was lit up by the lightning that zigzagged across the black sky and played about the tor.

On the crest of the ridge I glanced hurriedly back, but as I could see no sign of the hound I forsook the rough ways I had sought hitherto and

made for the nearest point of the salmon river. There I drank until I could drink no more, and just as I finished, the rain, which had held off so long, came down in sheets. It was delightful to see it splashing into the water, because I hoped the heavy fall would destroy my line even in the wood, and make it impossible for the hound to follow me.

It was now my object to reach the earth and relieve the vixen of her anxiety on my account; for she was always dreading that some great evil would befall me, or that I should disappear like the badger and my sister, and be heard of no more. The shortest way was through the wood, but I dared not take it; I shrank, too, from trying to fetch round by the moors. There was a less dangerous route on an unfrequented trail that wound in and out across the widest and most marshy part of the fen; but despite the hurricane and the blinding rain, I discarded it for the safer though more roundabout course by way of the bar.

I followed the river for some distance, and all along the bank and over the undulating country leading to the fen I did not see a living creature. I had the pitiless night to myself. Tremendous

waves were breaking on the pebble ridge, and as I crossed it the cruel gale blew the rain and spray in my face thus adding to my miserable plight. The very elements seemed against me in my forlorn condition. Every few minutes a vivid flash lit up the raging surf on the one side and the angry mere on the other, and left the night even blacker than before. Under shelter of the bank on the further side of the overflow I rested awhile before battling once more with the storm.

It was slow work crossing the rest of the bar, but at length I left the pebbles and took to the great reed-bed beyond. Along its weary length I trudged, and at last reached the earth without mishap, but thoroughly bedraggled and worn out.

If I live for twenty summers I shall never forget its welcome shelter nor the joy of the vixen at my return. She showed great concern at my distress, and when she had heard my harrowing tale, was the first to propose that we should leave our persecuted country and seek refuge in the cliffs far away to the north. I believe she would have started then and there, but I restrained her, and pointed out it was too merciless a night for a frog to turn out, much more for a litter of cubs, yet

afraid of thunder. As we discussed the matter over the remains of a rabbit, little did we imagine what twenty-four hours would bring forth; little did we dream that in so brief a time the fiend which had expelled all joy from our lives would have met a terrible end! But so it was.

The rumour reached us in the depth of night, and though a false report of his death had got about before, on this occasion the news proved to be true. He had done with hearth and wild, and his carcass hung gibbeted between rock and sky for jay and pie to scoff at.

Fate had overtaken him in the midst of a mighty chase. No eye witnessed it, but we have a few clues to its course. It must have begun somewhere amongst the wild moors beyond the jagged ridge, for the big fox generally kennelled there, and he was the quarry. It certainly swept across the peat moor, for only the big fox and the brindled hound could have left the double chain of deep-cut tracks which were visible in the black soil there for days after, and which corresponded with the big prints on the margin of the pool near the precipice. Very fierce and very close was the pursuit, and the fox must have been sorely pressed before he

made for the beetling edge over which the hound followed him. Whether on discovering the danger the latter tried to check himself, or whether the last of his great leaps carried him beyond the overhanging brink, is impossible to say ; but he fell, and in falling failed to shoot clear of the pine that springs from that scarp of the tor. He was wedged between the branches, and before dawn he was dead, and the country freed from its curse.

Scourge and terror though he was, he was a creature nobly endowed: if he had thrown in his lot with us, and not against us, he would have been the pride of the wild. I do not palliate his killing of the many dog-foxes, whose bones yet peep through the herbage in half a score spots of the waste. That was mere murder, to be explained only by a lust for slaughter; but it must be remembered to his credit that he never molested vixen or cub. His depredations were confined to the wild canine of his own sex, and the dread he inspired among us still survives in me. To this day when I am lying in my old kennel in the furze or the quaking bog, if but an adder or a marsh-tit rustle among the herbage, I think at once of the

hound, and never without a shiver. Even the sight of his bleached bones on the screes at the foot of the precipice chills me whenever I visit that weird spot, now shunned by all but the old raven, whose eyrie is the decaying limb of the stunted pine.

CHAPTER IX

THE GREAT RUN

The hunting season next but one after the death of the hound is memorable because of the new huntsman, whose energy, knowledge and perseverance were a revelation to us. Between him and his predecessor there was a difference as great as that between the brindled hound and old Shep. Whilst Yoicks the First was with us we used to look on him as a terror, and it was only after he was gone that we learnt to appreciate how gentle a persecutor he really was. It was his custom to sit his horse on the outskirts of the cover, whilst the hounds idled the time away inside or chivied the rabbits. As a rule, a few of them would dawdle behind in each cover, and do a little hunting on their own account; so that by the end of the day Yoicks would find himself ever so many

couples short. To collect the loiterers he used to stand on the tor and blow his horn for an hour at a stretch; but it was of little good, and he generally went his way without them. I have seen hounds going home at all hours of the night. Naturally they stumbled on us sometimes, and I am far from saying that when scent was breast-high they could not swing along and account for the best of us; but these occasions were rare, and on poor scenting days they did not seem to try at all.

We soon discovered what a friend we had lost when Yoicks the Second took over the horn and put a term to the good old days. Instead of yelling to the hounds from the outskirts, he would enter the brake afoot, and have them all around him. The difference this made was amazing. With an occasional word to cheer them, the hounds kept on searching as if they meant to find us; and find us they did, and nimble we had to be to get out of the cover alive. Then, too, there was no stealing away unobserved by the new whippers-in, no hanging back on the part of the hounds. The scream that told a fox had gone away brought every hound on his line, and then with the improved dash they showed, only the fleetest and

staunchest of us could live before them. I cannot say how many foxes they killed before the year was out, but it must have been a large number, and to my grief my little mate was among them.

Had the chase been left absolutely between us and the hounds, as for the sake of fair play I think it ought to be, we should have beaten them again and again by ruses known to ourselves; but it was not. When hounds were at fault the huntsman was generally on the spot to assist them, and seldom without success, for the wide casts he made would have caused old Yoicks to stand agape. To do the new huntsman justice, I must say that I do not think he interfered until the hounds had done all they knew to help themselves.

I believe it was so the day they found me on the hill, and followed close on my heels to the dunes. There I turned short along a trough between the sand-hills, hoping they would overrun my line, and so they did. The huntsman was with them, but as I heard neither the horn nor his voice between their losing the scent and the renewal of the full cry, I have always thought they put themselves right without his assistance. Later in the run I gave them the slip in the fen; and not on that occasion only,

but twice subsequently. Twenty couple of hounds were no match for me in the maze of overgrown waterways near the mere, to which I always led them. It was no easy matter, however, to shake them off in the open country away from the fen, as I discovered later in the same season.

One morning I lay on the moor, and hounds found me by working up to my kennel along the line by which I had reached it. Fortunately I heard them coming, and was up and away with a good start, though not before I was viewed. My first thought was to try and reach the fen, and for a while I headed that way, but a southerly gale, impossible to face, swept the moor and compelled me to turn and run before it. Nothing short of dire necessity would have induced me to do this, as there was not an earth or a clitter of rocks on the miles of undulating waste that stretched between me and the cliffs. Nevertheless, I did not doubt that my fleetness and endurance would be more than a match for my pursuers, formidable as they had become.

For a long time my confidence in my powers did not waver, but I began to have misgivings on seeing the pack sweep up the wide slope beyond

the jagged ridge at such a pace that it seemed as if the terrible burst of speed at which we had crossed the miles of heather had made no difference to them. Whether it really was so I cannot, of course, say; but I was conscious of failing strength, and greatly feared I might be pulled down before I could reach the cliffs. When yet a mile separated me from them the hounds had got dangerously near, and, despite my utmost efforts, were gaining foot by foot as the rocky pinnacles ahead grew nearer. Though the boulders strewing the sward were in my favour, the leading hound was nearly as clever in threading them as I was, and nothing apparently could save me from his jaws. At last he was so close to my brush that I had no time to choose a way down the cliff, and but for a narrow ledge which happened to be within reach, I must have fallen headlong to the sea. The ledge gained, I immediately dropped to that beneath, and so to the last one, below which the cliff fell sheer to the foam. There I remained out of sight of the maddened hounds on the brink of the cliff, and, as I hoped, safe from further molestation.

Presently, however, a stone fell on my shelf, and then another, and, looking up, I saw a madcap

of a terrier leaping from one ledge to the next, from the intense eagerness in his face, evidently determined to reach me. Seeing that to remain where I was would mean death to both, I sprang at great risk across a wide chasm to the only shelf within my reach. The crumbling edge gave as I alighted on it, and I was nearly gone, but after a life-and-death scramble I managed to save myself from falling and to gain a lodgment. Whilst I had been struggling to get foothold here the terrier had reached the ledge I had quitted, and though he could not come at me on account of the width of the chasm, he stood there trembling in every limb, yapping as well as he could for shortness of breath, until I felt sick of the sound of his voice.

This went on, as it seemed, for hours—so long, indeed, that I began to fear we should spend the night there facing one another; but at last I saw a man being lowered by a rope down the face of the cliff. Down, down he came, very quietly until he reached the ledge where the terrier was, and then he shouted 'Hold hard!' It was Yoicks himself. Scarcely were his feet at rest before he saw me. The instant he did so he shook his fist at me, and in a voice that made me hug the rock,

stuttered: 'This is the third or fourth time you've beaten me, Mr. Fox, but look to yourself, for I mean to have that fine brush of yours before the season is over.' Then he picked up the terrier with one hand, and holding the rope with the other, was hauled up out of sight.

I was truly glad to be rid of this terrible man, but my position was not an enviable one. If my shelf was difficult to gain, the ledge from which I had reached it was much more difficult to regain. Not a circumstance was in my favour. The take-off was bad: the ledge opposite was higher than the shelf where I stood; and my muscles, stiff from the chase, were getting more rigid as I grew colder. For this reason it would be wiser to make the attempt the moment the huntsman was out of sight, instead of deferring it until the sun had set. To tell the truth, it was not the approach of night I awaited. I shrank from the ordeal, though I knew it had to be faced. At last I braced myself for the spring, only to hesitate again before the desperate leap. Once more I gathered myself on the brink of the shelf, and, putting forth all my strength, so far cleared the chasm as to get my forepaws over the margin of the ledge. Even then

I feared the waves would have me, but the roughness of the rock enabled me by a frantic effort to drag my dangling body into a position of safety. There I stayed awhile to steady myself for the ascent, which, full of difficulties though it was, I made without mishap. On gaining the summit I set out for the earth as fast as my tired limbs would carry me, and found its safe shelter very welcome after the dangers I had passed.

I have dwelt on this incident because I have seldom been driven to such straits, and yet the peril to which I was then exposed was less deadly than that which threatened me in what I consider to be the run of my life. This I will now endeavour to describe, but for a proper understanding of it I must first speak a little of the long ramble on the February night that preceded it.

It was the pairing season, and I was in quest of a new mate. Too impatient to await the dusk, I left my kennel whilst the clump of firs on our hill looked black against the crimson west, and travelled so fast that soon after the stars were fully out I was breasting the hill that had hitherto marked the limit of my wanderings. From its crest I overlooked a valley divided by walls into

small fields, and dotted with the lights of three homesteads. A dog barked in a farmyard that I skirted; but I kept straight on, and, crossing the silent meads, struck and followed a track that rains had zigzagged on the flank of the opposite hill. It led me to a craggy ridge, where I called and listened and called again, but the only response was the mocking echo of my own voice.

On and on I journeyed, traversing at one place a lonely beach, noisy with the roar of the troubled sea, at another a sheltered woodland, where dead leaves crackled underfoot; nor did I check my pace until from a lofty hilltop far beyond, a most unfamiliar spectacle met my gaze. For a while it made me forget the object of my journey.

On more than one dark night I had seen a brake sparkling with glow-worms, but what were their pale fires or the twinklings of the frosty stars to the array of brilliant lights below me? At first I was lost in wonderment, but gradually I became aware that I was looking down upon the haunts of men. It seemed incredible that they should be crowded together as closely as the cells of a wasp's comb; but so they were. What I had mistaken for a mist arising from the wide creek was the smoke

from a thousand chimneys, and the subdued uproar that jarred with the murmur of the waves was the hubbub of a multitude.

In disgust I turned my brush on this human hive with its swarm of occupants, and, keeping to the ridge of a wooded slope that ran down to an estuary, I regained the unfrequented country-side and resumed my quest. But why recount the stages of my bootless search through the long night? As the hours passed I wearied more and more of wandering and calling, and at the approach of dawn, disappointed and forlorn, I gave it up and began to look about me for a kennel to spend the day in. But every brake and coppice seemed uninviting; one by one I passed them by, and in the end bent my steps towards a solitary peak that had the sickle moon above it. Two slopes rose between, and before I reached the base of the hill beyond the darkness had paled. In the gray light I hurried up the grassy steep, till, threading the furze above, I gained the bare rocks of the wind-swept summit.

Presently a faint flush suffused the eastern sky and, spreading, touched the clouds with rose and awoke the slumbering colour of the hills. Then

the glowing rim of the sun showed above the sea, and grew and grew until the whole disc showed like a ball of fire on the horizon.

Turning, I searched the gilded crags for some known landmark, and there in the distance my eyes lit on the unmistakable crest of the old tor. With a clear knowledge of my whereabouts—without which no fox betakes himself in content to a strange kennel—I sought and found a sheltered spot amongst the rocks in the full sunlight. There I lay and licked my pads, my glossy coat, and my beautiful ruffle; for I was in full courting attire. This done, I curled up on the heather and tried to forget my disappointment.

Sleep was long in coming, as, indeed, it always is when ten or a dozen miles separate me from my own country; but by degrees I became less and less conscious of the light and of the wind whistling about the column of rock above me. How long I slept I cannot say, but I awoke with a fearful start, wondering where I was and what I had heard. Only some wild gust about the peak or scream of passing bird, thought I, as I stretched myself on the edge of the furze hard by my couch. I was about to give my coat a shake and lie down again,

when the crack of a whip broke the stillness, followed, to my horror, by the cries with which the huntsman sends the hounds into cover. The situation was disconcerting, but I had not an instant to lose if I was to get away alive. Already, if my ears did not deceive me, the hounds were in the brake and my escape imperilled. With the utmost caution I made my way down, halting now and again to let a hound cross in front of me, and near the bottom I actually followed in the wake of another until he turned aside from my path.

When I had reached the edge of the cover I stopped to reconnoitre, despite the clamour behind me, and then, believing the coast clear, took to the open grassy slope leading to the valley. I had gone perhaps a hundred yards when there was a shrill scream that must have startled the whole countryside. You would have thought I had been shot had you seen me spring from the ground, but the next instant I steadied myself and settled into my stride, conscious that nerve and muscle must be husbanded for the run before me.

From near the crest of the opposing slope I looked back at my pursuers. The leading hounds were crossing the stream just in front of the main

body of the pack; a crowd of red-coats was thundering down the hill, but the only man I heeded among them all was the lean, wiry huntsman there in his usual place between the 'field' and the hindmost hounds. The speed at which they were coming on confirmed my fear that I was leaving a burning scent, but there was no help for it; my only hope, until I had passed out of this strange country, was in my pace. My way led across the heart of a level moor, but the wind blew in my teeth and caused me to swerve to the left from the line I should otherwise have taken.

The heathery waste now fell away before me to a sudden valley, where a ploughman stopped his team to mock me, but I kept straight towards the corner I was heading for, regardless of his shouting. As I left the field—and it was not a very big one—a couple of hounds showed at the gap where I had entered it. They were much too close behind me; but though I led my pursuers over mile after mile of undulating country as fast as I could gallop, I did not add to my lead, and they were not more than a couple of gunshots behind when I passed a roofless linhay on a barren upland.

There, through a depression in the ground, I

caught a glimpse of the sea—my last, thought I, with a pang; but there was no moment for pause or regret.

I kept on towards the cliffs, looking eagerly about me for some earth in which I might take refuge. Not one did I see, and, strange as it may seem, it was an obstacle that finally befriended me, for in the next valley I came on a long, high wall which I must surmount or be taken. At the first attempt I fell back and thought I was lost; but at the second, by a sidelong leap, and with the help of my brush, I just managed to reach the top, dragging myself up before the hounds could seize me and pull me back. They did not follow, and I kept wondering why, until I realized they could not climb the wall. I heard their maddened cries as I sped over a wide, wide field, dotted with groups of tall trees, nor did I lose them until I had crossed a broad stream, which I know now to be the lower reach of our salmon river.

Issuing from a thicket of evergreens on the further bank, I passed under a spreading cedar and came upon a lawn in front of a mansion. The place seemed deserted, but a peacock which flew in affright to the top of a stone gateway filled my

ears with its harsh cries as I threaded a perfect maze of yew-bordered paths, and at length reached a boundary-wall even higher than the first. Seeing that it was beyond my powers to climb, I ran along its base until I came to a big gate, through which I passed, in spite of the sour-visaged crone at the lodge who shook her apron at me and tried to drive me back.

With the chart of the country still clear in my brain, I went on and on, and had succeeded in reaching the springy sward that slopes gently to the cliffs when, to my dismay, I again heard the hounds coming after me. I say dismay, not surprise, because, though I had begun to hope that I had shaken them off, I was well aware that nothing but night would make that terrible huntsman desist from the pursuit of a sinking fox which had beaten him thrice before. He it was who had put them afresh on my line, and now he was once more up with them, for I caught a glimpse of him and of his white horse just before I dropped over the edge of the cliff. Down its steep face I leapt from rock to rock until I gained the strip of turf on the edge of the lower cliff. I sped along this as fast as my failing strength would permit, and after a time

passing the old drinking-place amongst the reeds I came on the little playground where I had gambolled as a cub. What happy nights I had spent on the little green across which I was now labouring, a bedraggled fugitive, with the clamour of the hounds ever louder and louder in my ears! Though I glanced at the cobwebbed mouth of the hole where I was littered, I knew I should find no safe refuge in such a shallow earth, and, distressed as I was, I preferred to struggle on and take my chance.

Deem me a coward if you will, but I own to a great fear then in my heart; yet my brain was hard at work to discover some means of baffling my pursuers. Nothing but a ruse put into instant execution could save me, and it was but a stroke of the good luck I have always enjoyed that with the need should come the opportunity.

I can see now the rude path athwart the face of the cliff along which I hurried and doubled, so that I might gain a lower, hidden track before the hounds could intercept me. As soon as I had leapt to this second path they came on. It was an anxious

moment when the leading hounds reached the parting of the ways, for in my despair I had resolved on a desperate step. Had but a single hound followed me, I should have dropped over the dizzy edge into the surging sea below. Luckily for me, they all took the upper track and, as I expected, on overrunning the scent, ceased their excited clamour.

In the silence that ensued I kept stealing along the shelf, fearful the while of being viewed by the riders on the edge of the upper cliff. At every exposed place I had to pass, closely as I hugged the furze, I dreaded to hear that awful scream that would announce my discovery; but nothing reached my ears except the voice of the huntsman, who had now come to the help of the hounds.

Abreast of the headland, I left the sea, and made my way along the bed of a little stream; but at what a pace! A hedgehog might travel wellnigh as fast. On my left lay the fen; but I was too distressed to seek it. Across the reedy plain was the sett which had been my point when I left my kennel on the peak; but though it was almost

within sight, I felt that I had not the strength to reach it. I might, however, gain the screes, and for this I headed. What a time I was in reaching the wood! and what a weary way it was through it to the rocks!

At length I passed under the last of the pines and came within sight of my goal, only, however, to find that I had been forestalled. A couple of red-coats seated on the boulders sprang to their feet on viewing me and yelled at the top of their voices. I never in all my life heard such a row as they made. Whether their shouts reached the ears of the huntsman or not I do not know; I was too much exhausted, however, to face the hullabaloo, and turned off towards the sett. I had not a doubt that it would be open; was it in my power to reach it? I dragged myself over the upper part of the fen, too far gone greatly to heed the hounds, whom I thought I could hear at times. Past the old trysting-place I crawled to the river. I scarce can tell how I managed to swim the swollen water, but I did, and, what is more, I wormed myself along and along until at last I reached the sett.

Stopped! For a moment my heart failed me,

and I lay down before the fresh-tainted faggots to await my fate. Yet, terrible as my extremity was, I could not remain there when I still had strength to struggle a little further. Even then life was too sweet to surrender whilst stiffening muscles were not too rigid to obey the will. So I staggered to the edge of the furze, and, catching the whimper of hounds as I neared a big boulder, summoned all my little remaining force, till by a desperate effort I succeeded in scrambling to the top. It was there the vixen used to sit and watch the cubs at play. The hollow crown held a little water, which I lapped before crouching as low as my arched back would let me, and thus refreshed, I prepared to face my fate.

I watched the pack as it crossed the marsh, and saw it take to the water followed by the horse of the huntsman, who swam by its side. There was no scent—at least, the hounds did not own to any—but the huntsman knew I should make for home, and he was aware that I had been stopped out. On reaching the earth he stooped, took a hurried glance at the faggots, and then led his horse past me up the hill. 'Wind him, my boys!' he kept shouting to

the weary hounds as he brushed through the furze. His voice grew fainter and fainter, but whether he went over the crest of the hill I do not know, because I could not turn my head to see. At least, he went so far that I felt sure he would not return. He did; what is more, he and his horse came and stood abreast the rock that befriended me. Presently the horse's pricked ears and fixed gaze betrayed my forlorn refuge. The huntsman turned his head, and I was discovered.

My relentless pursuer looked at me, and I met his eye unflinchingly to try and fathom his intent. I could not. Mercy I did not expect; yet man had given me my life once, and might again. But my former friend was a kind-hearted man, willing himself to suffer rather than ill-treat a helpless creature; while this was a merciless wretch who had cried 'Whoo-whoop!' over my little mate, who had hounded many another fox to death, and who would certainly not forego the crowning success of this great run. So I expected every moment to hear him shout, to hear him cheer the hungry hounds on their helpless victim. He was silent, however—silent through what seemed to me a

lifetime of despair and dawning hope, and when at last his lips did move, he simply muttered, 'Poor devil!'

Then he went to the earth, pulled out the faggots, and rode slowly away, leaving me alone with the night.

THE END

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